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Alienation of the revolution: How connectivity affects the sustainability  
of counter-discourse in post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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## **Abstract**

Early research investigating digital activism in relation to the 2011 Arab uprisings intended to determine whether digital media played a significant role in consolidating the revolutionary opposition. As a result, this literature essentially focuses on the exact moment of the January 2011 protests and often fails at considering the evolution of digital activism and social media consumption over time. Alternatively, this work goes beyond the context of the January 2011 events and investigates how participative media have been used over the course of the political crisis that led the 2011 Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions to the 2013 military coup d'état. By doing so, it elaborates the debate on digital activism and assesses how social media has affected public deliberation over the long run and as political leaders attempted to regain legitimacy in the aftermath of the uprisings. In doing so, this research contributes to the evaluation of what extent these emerging forms of political action, which Bennett and Segerberg conceptualise as *connective action* (2012) are *sustainable* and likely to materialise into institutional politics.

In order to map the post-revolutionary debate across a range of digital media, this study draws on a large data set extracted from different social platforms, including blogs, search engines and e-consultation project. Data visualisation tools and traditional discourse analysis are jointly applied to analyse this data set and identify how various political actors, such as party leaders, bloggers or random social media users debated online over the course of the 2011-2013 political crisis. In addition, this work includes a set of face-to-face interviews conducted on the field with Egyptian journalists and political activists actively engaged in the post-revolutionary debate.

By analysing the long-term effects of digital activism in Tunisia and Egypt, this research proposes to challenge the assumption, according to which digital media, as a manifestation of technological development acts as a factor of democratisation.

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I thank Nicolas for living this intense human experience with me on the field and for being so supportive over the last months of this research, as I was pregnant with our child.

**Declaration of Originality**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name \_\_\_\_\_Dounia MAHLOULY\_\_\_\_\_

## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgment</i> .....	<i>iii</i>
<i>Declaration of Originality</i> .....	<i>iv</i>
<b>1. Introduction chapter: Technology and democracy in the Middle East</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1. A holistic approach to connectivity: discourse and counter-discourse in periods of revolutions .....	4
1.2. Introducing the connectivity literature.....	6
1.3. Connectivity: the transition from emerging to mainstream .....	9
1.4. Connectivity and the sustainability issue .....	12
1.5. Connectivity: how revolutions turn counter-discourse into institutional discourse ....	14
1.6. The revolutionary process: negotiating the meaning of discourse .....	16
1.7. Unsustainable revolutionary discourse in Tunisia and Egypt .....	17
1.8. Introducing my methodology.....	19
1.9. Introducing my theoretical framework.....	20
<b>2. Theoretical development, section 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>22</b>
2.1. Fluid powers under the connectivity paradigm.....	23
2.2. From participatory culture to convergence .....	24
2.3. Witnessing the transition from emergent to mainstream.....	26
2.4. Fluid discourses and power struggles in earlier media environments.....	28
2.5. Conclusion to Section 1: towards a holistic concept of connectivity .....	33
<b>3. Theoretical development, section 2: discourse and counter-discourse in periods of revolution</b> .....	<b>34</b>
3.1. The discursive cycle from the perspective of the digital revolution .....	36
3.2. The discursive cycle from the perspective of the bourgeois public sphere .....	38
3.3. Intellectual leadership in the bourgeois public sphere .....	39
3.4. Beyond the bourgeois public sphere: bringing critical theory into practice .....	41
3.5. Rethinking the public sphere under the connectivity paradigm .....	45
3.6. Conclusion to Section 2: Anticipating the sustainability issue on the basis of Habermas public sphere.....	47

<b>4. Theoretical development, section 3: Assessing the sustainability of counter-discourse in Tunisia and Egypt.....</b>	<b>49</b>
4.1. Democracy and technology: the Eurocentric perspective.....	52
4.2. Rethinking the relationship between democracy, technology and radicalisation.....	54
4.3. Understanding the relationship between technology and democracy from the perspective of the field .....	56
4.4. Conclusion to Section 2: beyond the Eurocentric perspective.....	61
<b>5. Methodology: A nexus analysis based on four empirical strands .....</b>	<b>62</b>
5.1. Shifting ontological framework: constructing or deconstructive a normative vision of the world	66
5.2. Research and Introspection: Historical body of the researcher .....	69
5.3. Nexus Analysis: mapping the evolution of discourse over time .....	72
5.4. From Critical Discourse Analysis to Nexus Analysis.....	73
5.5. A naturalistic approach of discourse: towards computerised textual analyses .....	79
5.6. Nexus of practice: combining virtual and fieldwork ethnography.....	84
5.7. Analysing the activist blogosphere: data set and method .....	87
5.8. Applying data visualisation tools to map the 2012 presidential campaign (Egypt).....	92
5.9. Analysing the 2012 constitutional debate (Egypt): the Dostour Sharek e-consultation platform.....	97
5.10. Face to face interviews with key actors involved in the Dostour Sharek project....	103
5.11. Fieldwork ethnography: recruiting participants and facing the ethical challenges	104
5.12. Limitations of the research.....	111
5.13. Conclusion to methodology.....	112
<b>6. First empirical analysis: across the activist blogosphere.....</b>	<b>114</b>
6.1. Intellectual leadership across the activist blogosphere .....	115
6.2. The role of the blogosphere the post-revolutionary debate.....	120
6.3. Subjective journalism: a personalised account of the revolution .....	122
6.4. Institutionalisation of the revolution: competing narratives.....	126
6.5. The institutionalisation process: hijacking of the revolutionary agenda .....	128
6.6. Polarisation and lack of consensus .....	131
6.7. Mainstreaming of the revolution: rising popularity of the revolutionary debate .....	135
6.8. The Bubble effect: desperate attempt to recover intellectual leadership.....	139
6.9. Conclusion to empirical analysis 1: Connectivity, mainstream and absence of intellectual leadership.....	142

<b>7. Second empirical analysis: the 2012 presidential campaign on Google and Twitter</b>	<b>143</b>
7.1. <i>Methods: mapping the visibility of presidential candidates online</i>	145
7.2. <i>Introducing the first post-revolutionary presidential election in Egypt</i>	146
7.3. <i>Democratising the political debate or counter-discourse</i>	149
7.4. <i>Demystifying the role of Twitter and social media in the Egyptian revolution</i>	152
7.5. <i>Egyptian Twitter users and 2012 presidential race</i>	154
7.6. <i>Candidates' visibility across the media: Google searches and the Egyptian press</i>	157
7.7. <i>Candidates campaigning on Twitter</i>	159
7.8. <i>Mapping Hamdeen Sabahy's Twitter discourse</i>	164
7.9. <i>From Shafiq to Sabahy: revolution and counter-revolution intertwined</i>	166
7.10. <i>Conclusion to empirical analysis 2: fluidity of the revolutionary vocabulary</i>	167
<b>8. Third empirical analysis: the 2012 constitutional debate</b>	<b>169</b>
8.1. <i>Setting the context of the 2012 constitutional debate</i>	171
8.2. <i>The crowdsourcing process</i>	173
8.3. <i>Polemics and controversies</i>	174
8.4. <i>Interviewing the people behind the Dostour Sharek initiative</i>	177
8.5. <i>Success of the Dostour Sharek e-consultation project in terms of interactivity</i>	179
8.6. <i>Hidden interactivity: the sense of consensus</i>	181
8.7. <i>Preventing exceptions to the law: articles 14 and 18</i>	184
8.8. <i>Article 6: negotiating the meaning of Shura and democracy</i>	185
8.9. <i>Negotiating the meaning of sufficiency, justice, equity and freedom</i>	186
8.10. <i>Clarifying vagueness and uncertainties</i>	190
8.11. <i>Conclusion to empirical analysis 3: Connectivity as an illusion of consensus</i>	193
<b>9. Fourth empirical analysis: fieldwork ethnography</b>	<b>196</b>
9.1. <i>Evidencing the success of the counter-revolution on the field</i>	198
9.2. <i>Commenting on the post-revolutionary debate three years after the 2011 events</i>	203
9.3. <i>Hijacking the revolution</i>	205
9.4. <i>Identifying turning points in the circulation of discourse</i>	207
9.5. <i>The Upper Pole of the discursive cycle: from power to counter-power</i>	209
9.6. <i>Fluidity of the revolutionary discourse</i>	212
9.7. <i>The mainstreaming process: the bubble effect</i>	216
9.8. <i>Monitoring and self-censorship: reconsidering the benefits of social media</i>	219
9.9. <i>Returning to institutional politics or grass-roots political action</i>	224

9.10. <i>Connectivity, artificial counter-discourse and the sustainability issue</i> .....	227
9.11. <i>Conclusion to empirical analysis 4: a superficial revolution</i> .....	230
<b>10. Conclusion: the doping metaphor</b> .....	<b>233</b>
10.1. <i>Connectivity: the case of the 2011 Arab uprisings</i> .....	234
10.2. <i>Answering the question of sustainability</i> .....	235
10.3. <i>Rethinking the relationship between democracy and technology</i> .....	241
11. <i>Appendices:</i> .....	244
12. <i>References:</i> .....	271

## List of Tables

<i>Table 1: Research Design</i> .....	62
<i>Table 2: Blogosphere data set</i> .....	90
<i>Table 3: Description of the Blogosphere Data Sample 1</i> .....	91
<i>Table 4: Description of the Blogosphere Data Sample 2</i> .....	92
<i>Table 5: Sample of Egyptian newspapers extracted from the NexisLexis database</i> .....	96
<i>Table 6: Statistics released on the Dostour Sharek website after the 2012 referendum</i> ....	98
<i>Table 7: Description of the data set extracted from the Dostour Sharek e-consultation platform (2012)</i> .....	100
<i>Table 8: Inventory of comments sampled for each constitutional article</i> .....	101
<i>Table 9: Interview with members of the Dostour Sharek e-consultation project</i> .....	102
<i>Table 10: Interviews conducted as part of the fieldwork ethnography</i> .....	106
<i>Table 11: Sample of Participants</i> .....	108
<i>Table 12: Score of the 5 leading presidential candidates (Egypt, 2012)</i> .....	149
<i>Table 13: Description of the data sample extracted from the R-Shief data base</i> .....	154
<i>Table 14: Visibility of the candidates across the Twitter data set</i> .....	155
<i>Table 15: Findings of the Sentiment Analysis computed by Laila Shereen Sakr (2012)</i> ..	157
<i>Table 16: Visibility of the 5 leading presidential candidates across the NexisLexis news data set</i> .....	159
<i>Table 17: Inventory of the presidential candidates Twitter accounts (2012 presidential campaign)</i> .....	159
<i>Table 18: Inventory of unofficial Twitter accounts excluded from the data set</i> .....	161
<i>Table 19: Events surrounding the 2012 constitutional debate</i> .....	171
<i>Table 20: Distinguishing Interactivity and Intertextuality</i> .....	183

## List of Figures

<i>Figure 1: Circulation of discourse in the discursive cycle</i> .....	5
<i>Figure 2: Digital media and connectivity theory over time</i> .....	27
<i>Figure 3: Theory of Hegemony and Agency across media and cultural studies</i> .....	29
<i>Figure 4: Divisions between revolutionaries in the lower pole of the discursive cycle</i> .....	35
<i>Figure 5: From Intellectual Leadership to Political Practice</i> .....	43
<i>Figure 6: Mapping the evolution of the post-revolutionary debate in time</i> .....	63
<i>Figure 7: Intellectual Leadership in the discursive cycle</i> .....	116
<i>Figure 8: Digital media and Intellectual Leadership</i> .....	119
<i>Figure 9: Dissolution of Intellectual Leadership</i> .....	119
<i>Figure 10: Data visualisation computed on Google Trends (Voter Ecology Project, 2014)</i> .....	151
<i>Figure 11: Data visualisation computed on Google Trends (Voter Ecology Project, 2014)</i> .....	151
<i>Figure 12: Visibility of the 5 leading candidates across the Twitter data set</i> .....	156
<i>Figure 13: Popularity of the 5 leading candidates in terms of Google Searches (Voter Ecology Project, 2014)</i> .....	158

## 1. Introduction chapter: Technology and democracy in the Middle East

What is the difference between a protest and a revolution and under what conditions can a revolution lead to sustainable political change today? One inevitably comes to reflect on those questions when investigating the case of the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Arguably, these events may be interpreted as revolutions for they marked the end of Mubarak's and Ben Ali's rules, creating an opportunity for pluralism by stimulating public deliberations in the early stage of the revolutionary process. One may also interpret the 2011 events as the manifestation of a social (Elsewi, 2011) and technological revolution (Castells, 2012), since they introduced a new range of political actors and a new set of communicative practices in public debate.

Yet, it could also be argued that the uprisings did not entirely succeed in overthrowing the leading political elites over the course of the political transition (Stein, 2012; Puchot, 2012). Despite the fact that protests stimulated innovative forms of political engagement, illiteracy, corruption, and the polarisation of the political debate considerably challenged the democratisation process in the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] region. In addition, the predominance of the long-established ruling elites on the political scene proved to be a significant obstacle to the revolution over the years that followed the 2011 protests.

For this reason, the case of the 2011 uprisings shall introduce a reflection on whether emerging forms of political action, such as digital activism, can compete with and/or contribute to institutional politics. Yet in order to draw this reflection, one should consider whether digital activism succeeded in consolidating a powerful opposition after the 2011 events over the course of the post-revolutionary phase.

On 3 July 2013, the military coup d'état led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi two years after the revolutionary uprisings, thanks to which Mubarak's military regime had been removed in Egypt introduced a new perspective on the *Arab Spring*. Over the two years that preceded the event, as Tunisia and Egypt initiated their political transition, the

narratives surrounding the Arab uprisings constantly fluctuated between great hopes for democratisation and great scepticism.

On one hand, the first democratic elections held in Tunisia for the Constituent Assembly (2011) and the presidential race conducted in Egypt (2012) in the aftermath of the revolution suggested that the 2011 protests had succeeded in introducing democratic change. Over the months following the 2011 events, researchers demonstrated that *the Arab Spring* had initiated a new range of innovative practices through which young Tunisians and Egyptians experienced different forms of political engagement. Street art and digital media activism provided an arena for deliberation (Gerbaudo, 2012), thanks to which citizens initially gained a greater sense of national belonging (Breuer, 2012) and a certain feeling of empowerment in shaping the post-revolutionary debate (Elsewi, 2011).

This led many to believe that the social changes operating in the MENA region will ensure the freedom of expression and pluralism required to stimulate democratic development. In this regard, early studies appeared to be rather optimistic, when considering the role played by digital technologies in facilitating this democratisation process (Howard and Hussein, 2013). News media coverage (Cottle, 2011; Hirst, 2012), along with foreign governments (Christensen, 2011) further contributed to convey this *techno-utopianism* of the Arab-Spring, which relied on a very Eurocentric perception of the relationship between democracy and technological development.

On the other hand, the success of the traditionalist party Ennahdha in Tunisia (2011) and the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (2012) raised more scepticism among the left-wing and liberal pro-revolutionary youth. With the success of Islamist parties across the region, commentators became progressively more aware of the fact that democracy in the Middle East would not necessarily conform to the Western neoliberal model. Over time, the *cyber-utopian* perspective on the Arab Spring alternated with what Christian Fuchs (2012) has identified as a more pessimistic vision of digital activism as a source of social insecurity.

As Fuchs (2012) and Hirst (2012) demonstrate, each of these approaches (cyber-utopian and techno-pessimistic) are revealing of the fact that the Arab Spring is commonly addressed from the spectrum of a certain technological determinism. This phenomenon may also be understood as a manifestation of Marx's fetishism of commodities (1867), as the technological parameter responds to the desire to objectify the complex sociocultural dynamics at stake in the democratisation process (Hirst, 2012: 6; Fuchs, 2012: 387).

As a result, the literature on the Arab Spring often intends to confirm or demystify the significance of this technological parameter, instead of assessing the evolution of technology usage over time. Earlier studies offer a very limited perspective on the series of events that followed the revolutions and often prove to be biased by certain sets of hopes and expectations in debating what makes a democratic society.

This research responds to the need to understand digital activism and the Arab Spring from a more critical and less dichotomous angle. Unlike most of the studies conducted in the early stage of the revolution, this work investigates how digital activism evolved between 2011 and 2014, as a broader range of socio-political actors became active online and in the public sphere. By doing so, it evaluates the function of digital media at different stages of the revolutionary crisis and shows how technology contributed to serve different ideological agendas, producing a highly *fluid* revolutionary discourse.

By reflecting on the long-term evolution of the political and technological revolutions that occurred in Tunisia and Egypt between 2011 and 2014, I intend to overcome the debate between *cyber-utopianism* and *techno-pessimism*. Most importantly, I will explore how participative media serve different instances of discourse and how they may ultimately benefit well-established institutional powers, while helping new opposition movements to emerge.

In doing so, my research will provide empirical evidence to assess what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) or Tufekci (2014) commonly identified as the lack of sustainability of such forms of connective action. It will outline the reasons why digital activism fails at

relying on a consistent ideological framework over the long run and determine to what extent this phenomenon may explain the failure of the Egyptian revolution, three years after the uprisings.

Simultaneously, my research will draw on the Tunisian and Egyptian cases to reflect on the power struggles that experts are currently observing in the field of media studies between prosumers (Merrin: 2008), states and corporations (Jenkins, 2006; Van Dijck, 2013). By considering how digital media has been applied on the local/individual as well as on the institutional scale, this study illustrates how this tool progressively introduced a new *mainstream* communicative framework, and contributes to conceptualise the way cultural leadership and dominant discourses take shape in the digital age.

### **1.1. A holistic approach to connectivity: discourse and counter-discourse in periods of revolutions**

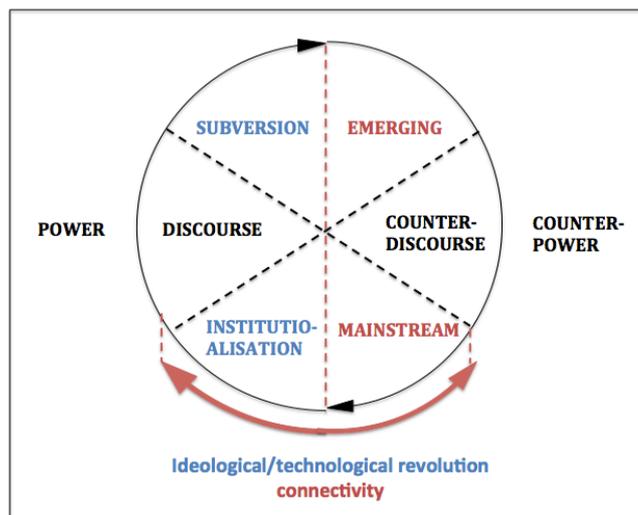
For this purpose, I will refer to the emerging concept of *connectivity* recently formulated in new media studies. I will show how this concept can be applied to understand how digital technologies have affected the circulation of discourse and power in the context of the Tunisian and Egyptian post-revolutionary debate. This theoretical framework will allow me to compare the way discourses and power circulate in the digital age as opposed to other media environments and determine whether digital media are likely to generate deep and consistent ideological change.

In order to determine whether connectivity alters sustainable forms of political engagement, I will examine how this concept – which has been discussed in the context of today's technological revolution – can be conceptualised in relation to a broader range of political and philosophical revolutions. I will develop a more holistic model of connectivity and compare this paradigm to the process through which revolutions operate a transition from counter-power to well established institutional discourse.

As I will argue, analogies can be made between connectivity and other manifestations of political and technological change in history during which discourse, power and identities tend to become fluid. These are times when emerging ideologies and social practices considerably challenge the prevailing *doxa* and when the dominant discursive and institutional frameworks are very likely to be renegotiated.

In my theoretical development (chapter 2), I propose visualising this phenomenon as part of a model which I will refer to as the *discursive cycle*. This model provides a conceptual framework for examining how connectivity and revolutions in general instigate the process through which counter-discourses progressively reach the masses before consolidating a new institutional power. One may also describe this phenomenon as the turning point, during which emerging practices progressively grow into the new mainstream. As emerging discourses and social practices gain in popularity, they institute deep ideological changes in society, bringing marginalised voices to the centre of the public sphere and potentially establishing a new elite in power. This model partly explains how revolutions traditionally operate on the discursive, ideological and cultural level.

**Figure 1: Circulation of discourse in the discursive cycle**



For this reason, I will rely on this model to determine what characterises a successful revolution leading to sustainable ideological change. Moreover, I will rely on this holistic concept to determine how the technological parameter – digital media – affects this *circulation of discourse*.

On the basis of this model, I will refer to the term *mainstream* to express the transition that the revolution – as it was relayed online - operated from emergent counter-discourse to institutional politics. Analogically, in my work, this term also relates to the evolution that the Internet operates from *emergent* to *mainstream* media. To some extent, I employ this term as it is commonly used in the literature, to designate the mass media hegemony. However, in most cases, I describe digital media as a *new mainstream*: an emergent media that has rapidly reached the masses and that is being capitalised similarly to traditional mass media. In this regard, the term slightly differs from the way it is usually applied and specifically refers to my model of a discursive cycle. Indeed, whereas this term is often applied to distinguish the *old* from the *new* media, I argue that the Internet is progressively endorsing the same characteristics of traditional mass media, when it comes to frame dominant media narratives and hegemonic discourse.

## 1.2. Introducing the connectivity literature

In order to set the bases of my theoretical framework, I will first outline how the connectivity paradigm has recently been defined across media studies and will comment on how this concept can be interpreted in relation to my discursive cycle model.

The term “connectivity” is commonly defined as the characteristic, or order, or degree of being connected <sup>1</sup>. The strictly technical, computational sense, it designates the ability of a computer, program, device, or system to connect with one or more others <sup>2</sup>. However, in the larger sense, it can be argued that *connectivity* also expresses the idea of interrelation,

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 1972

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge Dictionary

<sup>3</sup> [Cambridge.Dictionaryjournal.com/blog/14/01/2015/arrested-war-after-diffused-war](http://Cambridge.Dictionaryjournal.com/blog/14/01/2015/arrested-war-after-diffused-war)

intricacy, network and conjunction. In the collection *Digital World: connectivity, creativity and rights*, edited by Gillian Youngs (2013), Youngs first employs this concept to describe the evolution of Internet consumption from its early stage (interconnectivity), to the web 2.0 mass consumption connectivity.

According to Youngs (2013) connectivity as a paradigm is not incidental to the appearance of computer-based communication –as the strictly technical definition of this term would suggest. In fact, it is only when communication technologies start to suffuse all aspects of society that this notion becomes relevant to media studies:

the Internet has expanded beyond its knowledge society characteristics to host what might loosely be termed all of life, or more precisely engagements and activities, actual and potential, linked to most facets of political economy, society and culture. (...) it can be argued that as the panoply of forms of access (most recently smartphone and tablet) and applications grows, this becomes ever more complex. The continuing evolution of Internet into the mass sphere as a tool of ordinary people and everyday lives provides a new context for considering forms of online and inequalities. (Youngs, 2013: 2)

The transition of digital media usage from emergent practice to prevailing communication channels annihilates the distinction between old and new media.

Additionally, understanding how the Internet might shape power relationships and identify which agencies may benefit from it requires conceiving online-based interactions as part of a complex system. Whereas earlier research on Internet consumption tends to approach individual users and organisations (governments or corporations) as distinct and separate, connectivity involves a widening of focus, conceiving the impact of the digital on the large as well as the small scale. Applying such a system-based approach implies visualising individual users and power institutions as two interdependent entities:

We have witnessed layered and integrated forms of networked reality, from email through web interactivity through social multimedia connectivity. So while we must still look to the focal points of industrial, financial and knowledge-based capitalism – powerful states, corporations and institutions –

to map technological might and driving forces, we also have a new focus going well beyond such entities. (Young, 2013:3)

Inevitably, jointly investigating individuals' and institutions' discourses as they circulate through the same medium tends to invalidate the debate between *cyber-optimists* and *cyber-sceptics* (Oates, 2008). Scholars, who initially saw in digital technologies an alternative space for creative subcultures to blossom are now concerned about the way user-generated content might benefit the digital industry (Van Dijck, 2013). Alternatively, researchers originally interested in public policy, institutional discourses and mass media news framing come to examine how grass-roots political claims and collaboratively shaped narratives affect the agenda setting (Cottle, 2006). These changes in perspective have introduced a rather temperate and subtler critique of the way the Internet may challenge or further establish cultural imperialism. This incidentally explains why some of the social scientists working in this field since the early 2000s have recently reviewed their arguments (Jenkins, 2008; Turkle, 2012).

As I will demonstrate in my theoretical chapter, due to the overwhelming expansion of digital media to *all of life* (Youngs, 2013:2), researchers are formulating a more complex interpretation of the way power circulates between individuals, governments and corporations. While celebrating the empowering nature of the participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), they acknowledge the fact that today's emerging social and cultural practices serve more institutional interests (Jenkins, 2008) and contribute to the rise of informational capitalism (Dean, 2008).

Admittedly, media scholars have recently employed the term "connectivity" in relatively different contexts and to study distinctive aspects of digital media usage. For instance, José Van Dijck (2013) exclusively addresses connectivity in relation to networking applications and social platforms. Her theory nevertheless relies on the idea that digital media colonise all aspects of social life. Consequently, she claims that our perception of digital ICTs as an empowering technology should be reviewed, so as to identify the dominant power structures lying behind this industry:

Social media, (...) form a new online layer through which people organize their lives. Today, this layer of platforms influences human interaction on an individual and community level, as well as on a larger societal level, while the worlds of online and offline are increasingly interpenetrating. Originally, the need for *connectedness* is what drove many users to these sites. When Web 2.0 first marshaled the development of so-called social media, in the early years of the new millennium, participatory culture was the buzzword that connoted the Web's potential to nurture connections, build communities, and advance democracy (Van Dijck, 2013: 4)

In that respect, although her study of connectivity is limited to social media, it fits with Youngs' (2013) approach in exploring the micro and macro levels of digital media usage simultaneously.

In addition, Youngs emphasises the fact that, under the connectivity paradigm, the distinction between online and offline media becomes obsolete, as traditional mass media have all converged towards the digital:

[The interactions between technology, social and communications factors are] in part a matter of the growing fusion of online and offline in social senses as interactions and processes across them become increasingly enmeshed. Binary notions of the separateness of the two spheres are being eroded as different aspects of the same social activities (...) take place not in one or the other, but in both."(Young, 2013:5)

Overall, the connectivity paradigm is revealing of the fact that it is no longer possible to distinguish the different spheres of influence of digital media, or to differentiate traditional (mainstream) from new media. Internet can no longer be regarded as *emergent*, since it has fully incorporated *the mainstream*. As a result, it has become extremely challenging to determine who exercises control over media narratives and which agencies ultimately benefit from user-generated content.

### **1.3. Connectivity: the transition from emerging to mainstream**

As the instances of discourses are no longer distinctive, and while researchers are witnessing the rapid evolution from *the emerging* to *the mainstream*, connectivity has also

been described as a period of diffusion, unpredictability and uncertainty (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010). This is precisely what Hoskins and O’Loughlin have observed in their examination of how new media has affected the mediatization of war. Conducting a retrospective of the theoretical frameworks that have characterised the mediatization of war in the twenty-first century, Hoskins and O’Loughlin (2015) introduce the concept of “Arrested War”, which ultimately succeeds their earlier theory on “Diffused War” (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010).

In accordance with the connectivity paradigm, their earlier concept Diffused War illustrates the fact that media narratives have become unpredictable, as they are now sporadically produced by diffuse agencies. This phenomenon has been reflected in media studies, generating a multitude of concepts that have often failed to produce a replicable model to explain the overwhelming feeling of *uncertainty* generated by such media environment:

By the turn of the millennium, mass internet penetration and the post-9/11 war on terror signalled a (...) phase, that we called the emergence of Diffused War. Content seemed to emerge from nowhere, effects had no causes, and uncertainty reigned. This was a wild west moment in which much of the media ecology felt ‘out there’, beyond; the centre could not hold. (...) In the Diffused War phase we saw a melting pot of new concepts as scholars tried to get a grip on apparently novel and confusing phenomena. (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2015)<sup>3</sup>

Yet this Diffused War phase in which power and agencies have been competing in a fluid and constantly versatile symbolic space has come to an end. Instead, we are now witnessing the return of a *mainstream* media hegemony. Despite users’ contribution to the accumulation of content that has progressively been capitalised on by the digital industry (search engines, social media platforms, web-based applications), political institutions and mainstream media channels have now recovered control over news framing:

But today, (...) [user]-generated content and its chaotic dynamics ‘out there’ have been absorbed and appropriated. (...) The mainstream has enveloped the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/14/01/2015/arrested-war-after-diffused-war>

extreme. It has regained its powers of gatekeeping, of verification, of defining agendas. Any content that is acclaimed as alternative, oppositional or outside, only acquires significant value when acknowledged and remediated by the mainstream. Virality and spreadability, key concepts of phase two of the 'new media ecology', are not part of a sustainable, user-generated phenomenon, but are ultimately arrested by the mainstream. (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015)<sup>4</sup>

In Hoskins and O'Loughlin's terms (2015), the evolution from Diffused War to Arrested War exemplifies the fact that under the connectivity paradigm digital media has operated a transition from emerging to mainstream media. Beyond the mediatization of war, the connectivity paradigm is very similar to the concept of Diffused War in denominating this particular moment in time, when discourse becomes fluid and when the instances of discourses can hardly be identified.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/14/01/2015/arrested-war-after-diffused-war>

#### 1.4. Connectivity and the sustainability issue

From a different perspective, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) also contribute to conceptualise connectivity as a process through which discourses – and political action – become fluid and unpredictable. By comparing online-based activist networks to more traditional political organisations, they argue that today's connective action is no longer restricted to one specific institutional framework and is therefore appealing to a broader range of members. Most importantly, thanks to participative media, individuals are now able to personalise the political message, by constantly reshaping it. This particular feature of connective action makes it more inclusive and therefore more appealing than traditional political structures, which rely on a predefined ideological discourse. However, this is precisely what makes emerging forms of political action (*connective action*) very likely to be unsustainable and unable to achieve success in long-term political projects. In this regard, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) anticipate a crucial issue, when considering how connectivity will affect political engagement in future:

It is from the perspective particular to connective action that it becomes fruitful to return to the insistent concerns threaded through the general debate about digitally networked dissent: the question whether such action can be politically effective and sustained. (...) These concerns need to be addressed even if the contours of political action may be shifting: sustainability and effect are fundamental to assessing any collective action in the context of popular democracy. Given the nature of connective action, then, it is imperative to develop a means of thinking meaningfully about the capacities of sustainability and effectiveness in specifically networked action, and moreover, to apply this in examining how connective action plays out in different contexts and conditions. (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011: 36)

By highlighting the issue of *sustainability and effect*, Bennett and Segerberg (2011) inevitably bring us to contemplate how the arguments raised by such diffuse and organic movements might be incorporated by political institutions. Assessing sustainability and effect does not only require the observation of how activist networks spontaneously evolve over time. Most importantly, it involves focusing on the relationship between *connective networks* and the institutions that ensure representative democracy. In order to fully

explore the question of sustainability and effect, one should examine the circumstances in which those two different types of political actors may face ideological conflicts or share common interests. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, building up theory on connectivity requires considering all these parameters and applying a multidimensional approach to study how such flexible media narratives evolve over time.

In fact, the question of sustainability is implicit to the entire debate on connectivity. Overall connectivity characterises a time of uncertainty during which the boundaries between new and old media – as well as between *emerging* and *mainstream* media – are vanishing. Furthermore, across the literature, connectivity is also described as a process through which discourses, hence power, become fluid and versatile. In the absence of a fixed ideological framework, discourses potentially remain very superficial and are no longer sustained by a clear political identity. As a result, what is originally formulated as a counter-discourse may very soon be distorted, so as to serve the leading political forces that, unlike activist networks rely on well-established institutional structures.

According to late media and cultural studies, this paradigmatic shift specifically applies to the technological revolution that was introduced by digital media over the last two decades. However, by referring to the model of *discursive cycle* I developed earlier, I would like to suggest that every revolution – whether technological or political – comes with a phase during which discourses become more fluid, in order to facilitate the transition of power. On the basis of this emerging connectivity literature, I will formulate a more holistic interpretation of the discursive and ideological tensions that characterise such revolutions.

### **1.5. Connectivity: how revolutions turn counter-discourse into institutional discourse**

Every revolution introduces a new discursive cycle. Consequently, all revolutions face their own critical turning point, which is comparable to what social scientists are currently witnessing with the manifestation of the connectivity paradigm. This moment is systematically characterised by high tensions over power, often generating confusion about the meaning as well as the authorship of discourse. It occurs when emergent – or revolutionary – discourses gain legitimacy and tend to become standardised. Simultaneously, with the multiplicity of actors progressively involved in the revolutionary debate, this turning point is also when revolutionary claims are more likely to be distorted.

The reason why this process simultaneously translates into power struggles and identity crisis is that it adorns power institutions with an entirely new vocabulary and ideological framework. Since identities are precisely dependent on ideological discourses, they are inevitably thrown into confusion. On one hand, revolutionaries witness the fact that their emergent counter-discourse increasingly gains inertia. By acquiring recognition, it loses its flexibility to become another well-established and commonly shared consensus. Consequently, the pioneers of the revolution are very soon divided between those primarily attached to the foundation of the new ideology and those who remain essentially driven by the process of revolutionary resistance itself.

While the first group starts implementing the structure of a new dictatorship, the latter embraces a perpetual anarchist momentum, which survives and transcends political theory. In fact, whereas the essence of a revolutionary dictatorship essentially lies in theory (i.e. in the institutional and discursive frameworks that sustain power), the substance of anarchist resistance is embedded in practice. This idea was originally formulated by Foucault and Deleuze (1977) in their discussion on intellectuals and power, in which Foucault elaborates on what he perceives as a critique of discourse. As such, it allows us to distinguish critical theory from institutional discourse, as Foucault defines it in his work *The Order of Discourse* (1971).

In this correspondence, Foucault and Deleuze define counter-discourse as a set of social practices through which marginalised groups constantly contest the leadership of power organisations. As such, it specifically emanates from the same communities of individuals, whom institutionalised discourses are intended to rule:

(...) if the fight is directed against power, then all those on whom power is exercised to their detriment, all who find it intolerable, can begin the struggle on their own terrain and on the basis of their proper activity (or passivity). In engaging in a struggle that concerns their own interests, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose methods only they can determine, they enter into a revolutionary process. (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977: 216)

Interestingly enough, Deleuze and Foucault insist on describing counter-discourse as a social practice because they distinguish it from the role of intellectuals in outlining power struggles and deconstructing the prevailing *doxa*. Admittedly, intellectuals might produce critical forms of theory. Yet counter-discourse is primarily the result of everyday practices, through which dominated groups raise their voices to challenge social constructs:

The point is that writing a theory must somehow be linked with activism in order to be subversive. At the same time, we recognize that theory can pose a challenge to the *status quo* and, as such, *can* have profound political importance: Theory is political to the extent that it can blast apart totalizing hegemonic discourses which, at their most insidious, manage to include revolutionary viewpoints. A counter-discourse, however, is *always* political (...) In the end, one must, in the most uncomplicated sense, act. (Moussa and Scapp, 1996: 92)

Whereas power is crystallised into theory – as fixed form of discourse - counter-power consists in a fluid process. As such, it aims at remaining fluid, in order to keep questioning the nascent social constructs through which new relationships of domination take shape.

### 1.6. The revolutionary process: negotiating the meaning of discourse

Hannah Arendt's work *On the Revolution* (1963) contributes to conceptualise the cyclical evolution from discourse to counter-discourse, approaching it from the perspective of wars and revolutions. By analysing how discourses of warfare and revolution succeeded each other over the twentieth century, Arendt outlines the fact that institutional power and counter-power both relied on the same ideological vocabulary. In doing so, she demonstrates that many revolutionary ideals – such as the concept of *freedom* – remained very flexible over time, so as to be used to legitimate the leading political discourse as well as the justification of war:

It is important to remember that the idea of freedom was introduced into the debate of the war question after it had become quite obvious that we had reached a stage of technical development where the means of destruction were such as to exclude their rational use. In other words, freedom has appeared in this debate like a *deus ex machina* to justify what on rational grounds has become unjustifiable. (Arendt, 1963:14)

Freedom, in this sense, has always acted as a fluid component of discourse. As much as it remains a revolutionary leitmotiv, it is recurrently used to consolidate a new institutional order, sometimes accounting for new relations of domination. As a result the *revolutionary cause of freedom* is systematically succeeded by *freedom as a justification of war* – or vice versa - in the circulation of discourses:

(...) it has become almost a matter of course that the end of war is revolution, and that the only cause which possibly could justify it is the revolutionary cause of freedom. (Arendt, 1963: 17)

As I will show in this research, Arendt's reflection most certainly illustrates the fact that the ideological vocabulary of the revolution has been constantly redefined in post-revolutionary Egypt. Most importantly, it outlines how this phenomenon may have benefitted the counter-revolution, "for counter-revolution (...) has always remained bound to revolution as reaction is bound to action." (Arendt, 1963: 18).

Her work also reminds us that the prevailing ideological vocabulary systematically becomes more fluid whenever different instances of discourse are competing for power.

This may however become more problematic in the age of semantic web, as hashtags, tags and search keywords amplify the dynamics through which the meaning of a term is negotiated. Indeed, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) would suggest, the quicker the evolution of social networks, the more fluid the components of discourse are likely to become.

### **1.7. Unsustainable revolutionary discourse in Tunisia and Egypt**

As I conceptualise it in relation to my discursive cycle model, fluid discourses contribute to ensure the regeneration or renewal of power, as long as they facilitate the success of revolutionary process. Indeed, every revolution in history brings a period of uncertainty, during which discourse and identities inevitably become more fluid. At this stage, the revolutionary agenda is being negotiated among revolutionary thinkers, activists, political institutions and many other stakeholders, before gaining legitimacy and potentially defeating the regime in power. With digital media however, this process appears to be accelerated and/or emphasised, which is very likely to affect the cycle of discourse. On one hand, connectivity – as it has been conceptualised by late media studies – enables more individuals to shape emerging discourses and allows marginalised political groups to spread their message more efficiently. On the other hand, over the long run, those emerging political voices are very easily misinterpreted or strategically hijacked.

In the context of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, I will argue that the transition from *emerging* to *mainstream* arose too quickly for sustainable ideological change to occur. Digital media certainly contributed to render the revolutionary discourse highly fluid, making it accessible to a broad range of social and political actors. However, as I will show, this also explains why the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions failed at producing a consistent institutional framework and why they very soon became hijacked by the leading political groups. Over the revolutionary crisis, the meaning of the terms “pro-revolutionary”, “freedom” or “democracy” was constantly redefined, producing every time a new narrative of the revolution, which would only benefit well-established political institutions.

Although early studies have considered the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings as a successful trigger of political transition (Breuer, 2012; Castells, 2012; Howard and Hussein, 2013), I will argue that the revolutions remained superficial. Whereas digital media might have accelerated the traditional circulation of discourse, it prevented revolutionaries from developing a reliable ideological structure for their counter-discourse. In this regard, my research further elaborates on the sustainability issue anticipated by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) and more recently addressed by Tufekci (2014).

In order to map the circulation of discourse in post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt, my research will address to the following questions:

1. Did the symbolic and technological tools designed by pro-revolutionaries benefit the leading political forces over the months that followed the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt?

This particular research question intends to reconsider the assumption, according to which digital technologies acted as a factor of democratisation. Further, it brings us to consider the hypothesis that the political crisis following the 2011 events reveals a vulnerability intrinsic to emergent forms of political activism.

2. To what extent was the 2011-2013 post-revolutionary debate representative of the way emerging counter-discourses progressively gain legitimacy in periods of revolution?

Exploring this question actually requires assessing to what extent the Tunisian and Egyptian case studies relate to the model of a discursive cycle, through which counter-discourse turns into the new institutional discourse. In other words, it introduces a reflection on the way connectivity affects the balance between power and counter-power.

3. What was the role of social media and digital activism in enhancing the *fluidity* of the revolutionary discourse over the months that followed the 2011 revolutions?

The third of my research questions shall bring me to address the sustainability issue and determine whether *fluid* counter-discourse can be as successful over time as on the long run.

These three research questions will lead me to examine to what extent the revolutionary discourse shaped by different political actors across social media deviated from its original purpose over the three years that followed the uprisings. This will allow me to determine whether social media activism has facilitated the progressive alienation of the revolution, by preventing the revolutionary discourse from relying on a sustainable ideological framework.

In addition, by elaborating on my second research question, I will determine whether digital media may affect the circulation of discourse and show how enhanced connectivity may jeopardise the process through which new ideology comes to power. Finally, I will rely on a set of empirical evidences resulting from data visualisation, discourse analysis and qualitative interviews to show how the ideological vocabulary surrounding the revolution proves to be fluid. I will demonstrate that the meaning of revolutionary keywords such as “equity”, “social dignity” or “freedom” has constantly evolved in the course of the political events that punctuated the post-revolutionary debate.

### **1.8. Introducing my methodology**

In order to map the evolution of the revolutionary discourse over time, I rely on a methodological approach developed by Scollon and Scollon (2004), which involves different qualitative methods and a multimodal data set. This approach, called *nexus analysis*, combines discursive or semiotic analysis with ethnographic studies in both virtual and naturalistic settings. Most importantly, it is specifically designed to study how digital technologies may impact on power relationships over time and to identify those changes in the ways in which institutional discourses or media narratives evolve. My nexus analysis relies on four empirical strands, in which I apply distinctive methods to study a range of social platforms, at different stages of the post-revolutionary crisis (2011-2014). In the first

empirical strand I develop a discursive analysis of a sample of blog articles posted by pro-revolutionary activists between 2011 and 2013 in Tunisia and Egypt.

In the second empirical strand, I apply data visualisation tools (Google Trends and R-Shief) to outline the way official leaders and party representatives have been campaigning on social media (Twitter) over the course of the 2012 presidential campaign (Egypt).

For the third empirical strand, I conduct a thematic analysis on a sample of comments posted on the Dostour Sharek e-consultation platform designed by the Constituent Assembly to report on the 2012 constitutional referendum (Egypt).

Finally, in the fourth empirical strand I will comment a set of qualitative interviews and informal conversations I conducted with political activists, journalists and active social media users during a fieldwork conducted over three months in affiliation of the American University in Cairo.

By considering different social actors engaged in the post-revolutionary debate – from politicised bloggers to random social media users – my multimodal data set outlines the ways in which public deliberations operated across different social platforms between 2011 and 2014. In doing so, it determines whether digital media inspired a sustainable form of political engagement and whether it successfully supported political actions, beyond the revolutionary protests.

### **1.9. Introducing my theoretical framework**

Before elaborating on my methodological design, I will first set out the theoretical bases of this research and expand on the emerging literature on connectivity. For this purpose, I will refer to Hoskins and Tulloch's (forthcoming) work on connectivity as well as to Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) concept of Diffused War. This will lead me to clarify the idea of connectivity as a phase of *uncertainty* during which discourses are fluid and diffused. I will then draw on Jenkins' (2006) work of convergence and Castells' work on network society

(2007) to illustrate the fact that power – as in the case of discourse – has become harder to identify under the connectivity paradigm.

Secondly, I will further elaborate on my discursive cycle model. For this purpose, I will refer to Habermas' work on the bourgeois public sphere (1962) and its critique by Nancy Fraser (1990) to recall how social theory has explained the circulation of discourse, prior to the invention of digital media. This will lead me to identify how successful counter-discourses have gained legitimacy in the past and what traditionally characterises the process through which emerging ideologies and practices arise as the new mainstream.

Finally, I will argue that a holistic perspective on connectivity helps in developing a more critical understanding of the role of social media in post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt. Defining connectivity as the transition from *the emerging* to *the mainstream* enables us to see beyond the division between techno-utopianism and cyber-pessimism. Most importantly, in the particular case of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, this allows me to overcome the debate on whether social media did play a significant role in the 2011 uprisings.

The real question that the literature on the Arab Spring has failed to address is who ultimately benefitted from the liberalisation of the political debate to which digital media contributed in the aftermath of the revolution. This would introduce a debate on *how* and *by whom* digital technology should be used, so as to stimulate the democratisation process. As Walter Benjamin (1936) suggests, technology *per se* does not act as a means of empowerment. Therefore, the function of digital media in the democratisation process can only be assessed in relation to the way such technologies have been applied during the course of the political transition that followed the uprisings. In addition, this question can only be answered by identifying the different agencies that contributed to shape the revolutionary discourse online.

## 2. Theoretical development, section 1: Introduction

In this section of my literature review, I will elaborate on the concept of connectivity and comment on how media scholars have progressively shifted perspective when conceptualising power relationships in the digital age. In my introduction, I argued that the connectivity paradigm requires studying media consumption on multiple scales. With the expansion of digital media, many aspects of individuals' personal and social life have merged, neutralising the division between the private and public spheres (Flichy, 2010). Media users have become both producers and consumers in today's informational capitalism, which involves rethinking the way labour is traditionally classified (Fuchs, 2010). As a result, it is now hardly possible to determine when and whether media narratives are collaboratively shaped within civil society or framed by power institutions.

The connectivity literature precisely describes this phenomenon by qualifying power in the digital age as *uncertain, fluid* and *unpredictable* (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). In order to exemplify how this argument has been formulated in the field of media and cultural studies, I will now discuss to Castells' work on network society (2007) and Jenkins' theory of *convergence* (2006).

Simultaneously, I will draw on Hoskins and O'Loughlin's (2015) concept of Arrested War and submit that discourse is becoming more fluid as the result of the transition that the Internet has operated from *emerging* to *mainstream* media. This will lead me to examine whether media scholars have witnessed a similar phenomenon in the past, and whether minority and hegemonic voices have already merged to form a fluid discursive environment prior to digital media. In doing so, I will discuss whether connectivity is specific to the digital age or potentially applies to all technological and ideological revolutions through which the emerging turns into the mainstream.

## 2.1. Fluid powers under the connectivity paradigm

In addition to the works of Bennett & Segreberg (2012), Van Dijck (2013), Youngs (2013) and Hoskins and Tulloch (forthcoming) that initiate the debate on connectivity, a broader set of theories could be considered as part of the same body of literature. Among others, theories such as Jenkins' notion of convergence (2006) and Castells' network society (2007) equally formulate the idea according to which the boundaries between scales and agencies are becoming harder to identify. Most importantly, by developing a global (system-based) understanding of power in the digital age, Jenkins (2006) and Castells (2007) both demonstrate how intricate relationships of domination have become and how counter-discourse can easily shift into the sphere of corporate or institutional power.

In his work, Manuel Castells (2007) comments on how participative media progressively distorted the *gatekeeping* process through which news was traditionally framed, by enabling individuals to directly shape and produce media narratives. This ultimately produced what Castells refers to as the sphere of "mass self-communication", in which information was more transparent and dominant discourses became more open to being challenged. On the other hand, however, Castells (2007) demonstrates that the emergence of mass-self communication enhanced the visibility of global markets and created more opportunities for institutions to spread their narratives and establish their economic leadership. With media convergence, participative and traditional mass media have merged, which renders the distinction between grass-roots and institutional powers unclear.

This network society not only benefits not only global markets but also traditional political institutions eager to remain in control of their media image and of the way their political message is delivered. Therefore, according to Castells (2007), media convergence has led to a *convergence of power*. The main characteristic of the network society lies in the fact that discourse and counter-discourse are both multimodal: they coexist in the same connective space. Castells' theory introduces a reflection on the tensions occurring between these two spheres of power.

On one hand, dominant institutions are formed by specific networks constantly interacting with and within each other, under the supervision of the state, which acts as the ultimate institutionalised power. On the other hand, networks of social change commonly interact on the individual level to relay alternative narratives and minority voices, which the institutions in power fail to represent. By doing so, they compete for leadership over the dominant media narratives. Indeed, Castells relies on the Foucauldian assumption, according to which power struggles primarily manifest themselves through discourse:

(...) the fundamental power struggle is the battle for the construction of meaning in the minds of the people. (...) For society, the key source of the social production of meaning is the process of socialized communication. (Castells, 2012: 5-6)

And in the network society, institutions and social movements constantly extend their own networks, while connecting with one another as they compete for discursive leadership:

(...) how do power networks connect with one another while preserving their sphere of action? I propose that they do so through a fundamental mechanism of power-making in the network society: switching power. This is the capacity to connect two or more different networks in the process of making power for each one of them in their respective fields. (Castells, 2012: 8)

Consequently, along with Bennett's theory of connective action, the network society theory assumes that networks remain highly versatile and might rely on unpredictable or provisional relationships. By doing so, it confirms the idea that the distinction between discourse and counter-discourse has become extremely hard to define, given the complex interplays that sporadically take place between various networks.

## **2.2. From participatory culture to convergence**

One comes to the same conclusion when comparing Jenkins' work on participatory culture (2006) to his work on convergence (2008). Whereas participatory culture celebrates the rise of a fully collaboratively shaped popular culture, his later work postulates that users are now competing with media corporations for cultural leadership. Media convergence is regarded as a sociological rather than a technological phenomenon, through which sub-

cultures and the dominant cultural industry coexist and interfere with each other, often reaching the same audience. Most importantly, Jenkins suggests that the struggles arising between individual users and media corporations results from a growing marketization of digital communication networks:

(...) perhaps industry leaders were acknowledging the importance of the role ordinary consumers can play not just in accepting convergence, but actually in driving the process. (Jenkins, 2008: 8).

In other words, Jenkins does not develop his theory of convergence as a substitute for participatory culture. On the contrary this convergence of cultural leadership – which we might also interpret as a convergence of discourses – is to be understood as the continuation of his participatory culture paradigm. Traditional mass media only incorporated the virtual space in order to keep reaching a large audience, which paradoxically highlights the fact that participative communication channels have attracted a critical mass of users. Ironically, the participatory framework became a victim of its own success.

Referring to Pool's (1983) original definition of media convergence, Jenkins particularly insists on the idea of media convergence as being first and foremost the manifestation of a transition. In this regard, the real question that one should considered when approaching this phenomenon is not so much which political voices or economic interests are ultimately benefiting from this technologically convergent environment. Rather, we should examine how sometimes-divergent media discourse – and here I mean *discourse* versus *counter-discourses* – might collide or blend in:

(...) I find myself reexamining some of the core questions Pool raised – about how we maintain the potential of participatory culture in the wake of growing media concentration, about whether the changes brought about by convergence open new opportunities for expression or expend the power big media. (Jenkins, 2008: 11)

By conceiving this polarisation of media discourses in the digital age, Jenkins bridges the gap between two opposite schools of thought that might categorised as *cyber-optimism* versus *cyber-pessimism* (Oates, 2008). The claims for power have become as convergent

as the technology itself, which inevitably renders power highly fluid and versatile. This argument paves the way for connectivity theory, in showing how fluid discourse is becoming with the expansion of digital media.

Indeed, it suggests that discourse – as the instrument of power – remains in motion and follows a cyclical evolutionary path, through which it comes to serve shifting political agendas. Moreover, it is revealing of a turning point in the way social sciences have approached Internet consumption since the early 2000s. Whereas the Internet in its early stages was essentially regarded as an alternative to traditional mass media, Castells (2007) and Jenkins (2008) note that it progressively incorporates features of the mainstream (mass media hegemony).

### **2.3. Witnessing the transition from emergent to mainstream**

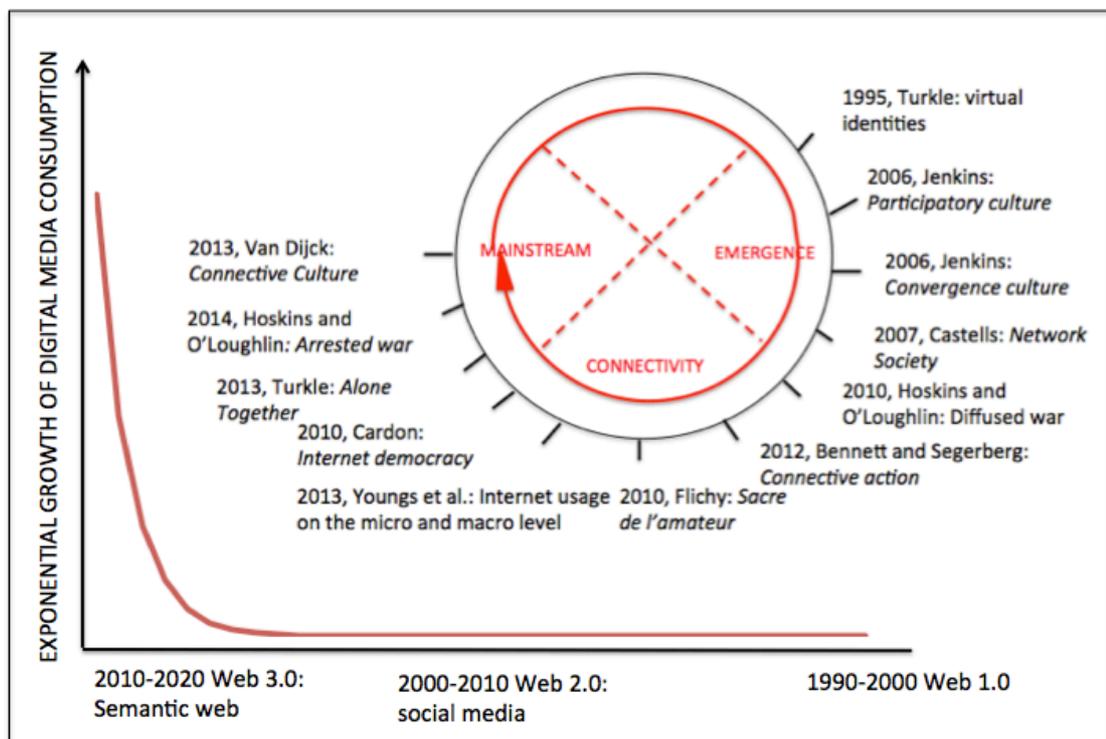
Among scholars, the Web is no longer conceptualised as a means of empowerment, which potentially challenges cultural imperialism (Turkle, 1995; Rushkoff, 2003; Jenkins, 2006). Instead, the Internet is perceived as the conjunction of old (top-down) and new (bottom-up) communication flows. Consequently, media scholars have become more interested in analysing how individuals, corporations and governments jointly benefit from media convergence and how they respectively compete for legitimacy. In doing so, they tend to be more critical with regards to the assumption that digital media help contesting dominant discourses (Van Dick, 2013). Yet this evolution is only representative of the fact that digital media are progressively merging with the mainstream.

As the graph below suggests, the tensions that may occur between different instances of discourse only become visible, when new agencies gain cultural leadership. Connectivity, acts as a turning point in the way media narratives are produced online. Initially, individual users enjoyed greater freedom in the process of producing, sharing, rating and filtering information (Jenkins, 2006). With social media and mobile phone applications, the Internet became more user-friendly and appealing to a broader range of users (Flichy, 2010). Yet although user-generated content is now more accessible and diversified, it is formatted and

commercialised on the basis of hidden algorithms determined by a new generation of media corporations (Van Dijck, 2013).

As Hoskins and O’Loughlin suggest in postulating a transition from Diffused War (2010) to Arrested War (2015), news is now framed similarly to the way it was produced by mainstream news editors. Connectivity manifests itself as a sign of this transition. Indeed, to a large extent, connectivity is comparable to the moment when the two sides of a set of scales reach the perfect equilibrium, before one side outweighs the other.

**Figure 2: Digital media and connectivity theory over time**



Provided that connectivity can be explained as the process through which emerging communicative practices reach the masses, we might easily argue that this phenomenon has already occurred in previous media environments. As a matter of fact, media scholars have witnessed and described similar discursive tensions when studying traditional one-to-many mass media communication.

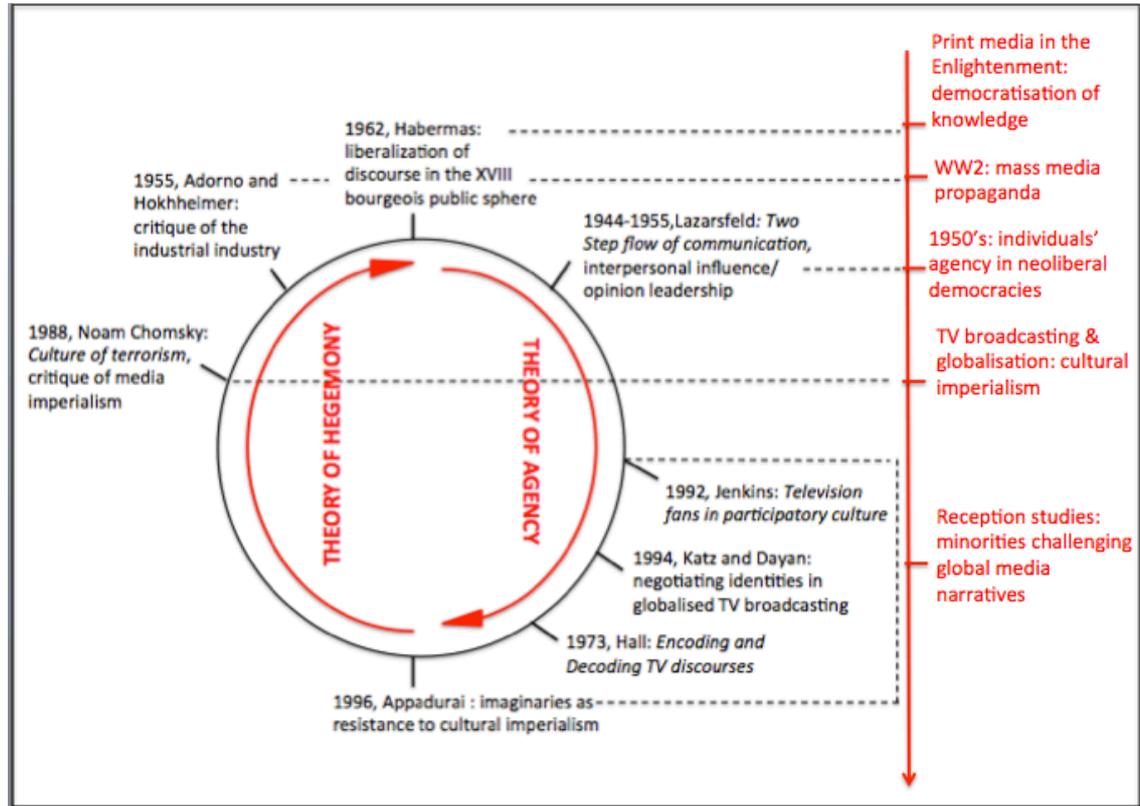
#### 2.4. Fluid discourses and power struggles in earlier media environments

Over the twentieth century, it can be argued that media experts have always been divided between a *theory of agency* and a *theory of hegemony*. Every form of mass media proved to inspire both hegemonic and more creative forms of discourses, at different stages of its evolution. While Marxist thinkers contested the rise of a “culture industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944), reception studies demonstrated that TV audiences actively participate in shaping the meaning of media narratives (Hall, 1973; Dayan and Katz, 1994). When considering to what extent broadcast media had led to a globalised society, researchers (Appadurai, 1996) witnessed the same tensions over cultural leadership as those that might occur today under the connectivity paradigm. Nelly Stromquist (2002), for instance, describes these tensions as independent from the relationship between technology and globalisation. Although media narratives circulate on a new scale, power struggles keep operating in the same old fashion:

(...) the debate centers on whether the phenomenon of globalization is old or new. In my view, the current globalization is a process that builds up on previous relations of social and economic asymmetry. (...) Some technological tools are not only new but constantly changing. They are affecting production, information, consumption, and culture in unprecedented ways (...). Power has existed since time immemorial; the configuration and use of power under the contemporary globalization is new because it touches the entire world and even defines it. (Stromquist, 2002: 2)

As I will argue, this observation equally applies to the debate on connectivity. Like broadcast media, digital media have introduced a new layer of complexity to the process through which discourse takes shape. However, power struggles have remained the same and keep determining discourse as the instrument of power in the very same way.

Figure 3: Theory of Hegemony and Agency across media and cultural studies



On one hand, traditional mass media have been applied to disseminate and further establish dominant ideologies. Walter Benjamin is among the first to have contested this aspect of communication technologies in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). Along with the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (1947), his critique is revealing of how state-owned media contributed to the nationalist propaganda in twentieth century Europe, offering a highly skeptical perspective on how such technologies affect creative and politically subversive forms of expression. A later tradition of Marxist critique, which includes (among others) the work of Noam Chomsky (1988) has also demonstrated how privately-owned broadcast media established a dominant culture, progressively instituting a globalized society.

On the other hand, however, reception studies have also underlined the fact that the members of a mass media audience negotiate meaning through a hermeneutic process and

in relation to their own social and cultural environments. This theory of agency resonates with Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1945; 1955) two-step flow of communication as well as with their work on interpersonal influence. By demonstrating how campaigns and media narratives can produce different interpretations depending on the networks among which they are debated, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1945; 1955) foresee the significance of social networks in the reception process. As they identify this crucial parameter long before the invention of digital media, they demonstrate that audiences remain relatively autonomous in their perception of media narratives.

Likewise, the work of Dayan (2000), Hall (1973), Jenkins (1992), and Appadurai (1996) suggests that audiences were already very much involved in the construction of dominant media narratives, prior to the invention of digital media. This tradition of media studies contemplates on how subjectivities are intertwined with media narratives and explores the extent to which individuals and minorities may challenge or negotiate those narratives creatively. For instance, in developing his theory of the "presque-public" (2000) Dayan investigates the extent to which television audiences perceive themselves as belonging to a public. For this purpose, he examines whether ceremonial events<sup>5</sup> broadcasted live on national television generate an individualistic or rather a collective process of reception.

In his 1973 essay on *Encoding/Decoding In Television Discourse* Stuart Hall argues that television audiences are indirectly involved in the production of TV discourses. Most importantly, he claims that *production* and *reception* co-determine media narratives, since the institutional instance of TV broadcasting is meant to survey and anticipate audiences' demands:

The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a 'moment' of the production process in its larger sense, though the latter is 'predominant' because it is the 'point of departure for the realization' of the message. Production and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the

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<sup>5</sup> This terminology applies to what Katz and Dayan (1994) categorise as *ceremonial television*. It refers to the mediatization of political, cultural or sports events as well as historical commemorations broadcast live on national television.

totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole. (Hall, 1993: 93)

In other words, it can be argued that consumers and power institutions jointly contributed to shape media discourses in the age of traditional mass media.

In fact, this argument resonates very well with the work of Appadurai (1996). In his essay on global ethnoscares, Appadurai proposes that mass media technologies disrupt the balance of *imaginary* spaces, according to which local and national identities are constructed. Despite the fact that national identities may be threatened by the global mediascape, he claims that marginalised cultural perspectives survive in the process of reception. These acts of resistance constitutes what Appadurai refers to as the “ethnoscape” (1996: 32) a set of peripheral subcultures that act as diasporic public spheres:

An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just in imagined communities) and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them. By *ethnoscape*, I mean the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. (Appadurai, 1996: 32)

For that matter, he argues that any struggles over discourse – or more specifically, *imaginary spaces* – in the “new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” (Appadurai, 1996: 32). Globalised communication “cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (...) Nor is it susceptible to simple models (...) of consumers and producers (...)” (Ibid).

Overall, this literature most certainly suggests that, as much as this may seem a particularity of the digital age, discourses and counter-discourses – have often coexisted in the same media environment. Traditional mass media has inspired creative ways to subvert or challenge dominant narratives, before media users were directly involved in the

production of media content. Most importantly, reception studies demonstrated that minorities were already able to reshape and personalise the prevailing discourse, prior to the invention of digital media. This suggests that discourse, to a certain extent, has always been fluid and that media narratives have always been the object of tensions occurring between dominant and emerging forms of discourse. In this regard, I agree with Stromquist (2002) that it would be irrelevant to debate whether a specific medium is more likely to serve hegemonic or more peripheral instances of discourse. Instead, I propose that every *media revolution* introduces a cycle through which those different instances of discourse compete for power.

For this reason, I would like to extend the debate on connectivity and determine whether this concept is not somehow the manifestation of a phenomenon that characterises every technological or ideological revolution. To some extent, what has been said on connectivity equally applies to many cases of technological and ideological revolution across history. Like connectivity, every revolution introduces a phase of uncertainty, during which the instances of discourses can hardly be identified. Over the course of the revolutionary process, struggles between power institutions and revolutionaries lead to the constant redefinition of ideological vocabularies, which generates a fluid discursive environment. This is precisely what Hannah Arendt (1963) demonstrates when analysing how the concept of freedom has adopted different meanings over the succession of wars and revolutions that punctuated the twentieth century.

And yet ultimately, by spreading the revolutionary ideology, revolutions progressively institute a new prevailing order. In doing so, they establish the emerging counter-discourse as *the new mainstream*. In spite of the fact that they bring a new elite into power and substantially change the structure of society, they generate new relationships of domination and rely on a new range of power institutions, which will be challenged by the next revolutionary uprising.

Therefore, just as connectivity can be visualised as part of a cyclical process through which the emerging media arise as the mainstream, revolutions ensure the renewal of the

dominant discourse, by converting counter-power into power. This phenomenon may also be illustrated as a cycle, which I will refer to as the *cycle of discourse* (or *discursive cycle*) and which provides us with a holistic model with which to assess whether or not connectivity leads to sustainable forms of power.

## **2.5. Conclusion to Section 1: towards a holistic concept of connectivity**

The emerging connectivity literature suggests that digital media has reached a critical point in its evolution. Initially regarded as an environment in which critical minority voices and creative subcultures would blossom; it is now seen as likely to serve dominant as well as emergent discourses. Media scholars are progressively becoming increasingly critical as they are witnessing the way this communication technology potentially serves multiple and sometimes diverging political or economic agendas.

At the same time, this phenomenon is revealing of the fact that corporate and institutional powers are regaining influence over participative media. As such, it can also be interpreted as the rise of a new mainstream. It is worth comparing the connectivity paradigm to earlier forms of media revolutions in order to understand whether the tensions operating between discourse and counter-discourse are substantially different in the digital age.

### **3. Theoretical development, section 2: discourse and counter-discourse in periods of revolution**

The way connectivity has recently been conceptualised appears to point to the fact that media scholars are currently witnessing a new media revolution. However, it may not be sufficient to explain how this revolution is different from previous technological revolutions in history. In order to assess whether connectivity introduces a paradigmatic shift, we need to discuss this concept in relation to the way discourse and power circulate, aside from any specific media environment. For this purpose, I propose to build on and contribute to connectivity theory by drawing a parallel with the way emerging forms of discourse become institutionalised over the revolutionary process.

As Deleuze and Foucault (1977: 216) suggest counter-discourses are commonly formulated on two different levels. Whereas intellectuals produce critical theory, political activists enact this theory in everyday practices. In this regard, one could easily argue that every revolutionary discourse faces the challenge of bringing critical theory into the political sphere and turning the revolutionary ideology into practice. In other words, revolutionary counter-discourses rely on a critical theory intended to contest the dominant discourse, as well as on political activism, which is meant to substitute it for the revolutionary ideology (Moussa and Scapp, 1996: 92).

For that matter, revolutionaries are often divided between those primarily driven by the process of opposing power and those who intend to gain legitimacy in the political sphere. While the former seek to contest any form of hegemonic discourse, the latter contributes to institutionalise the revolutionary ideology, turning it into a new hegemony.

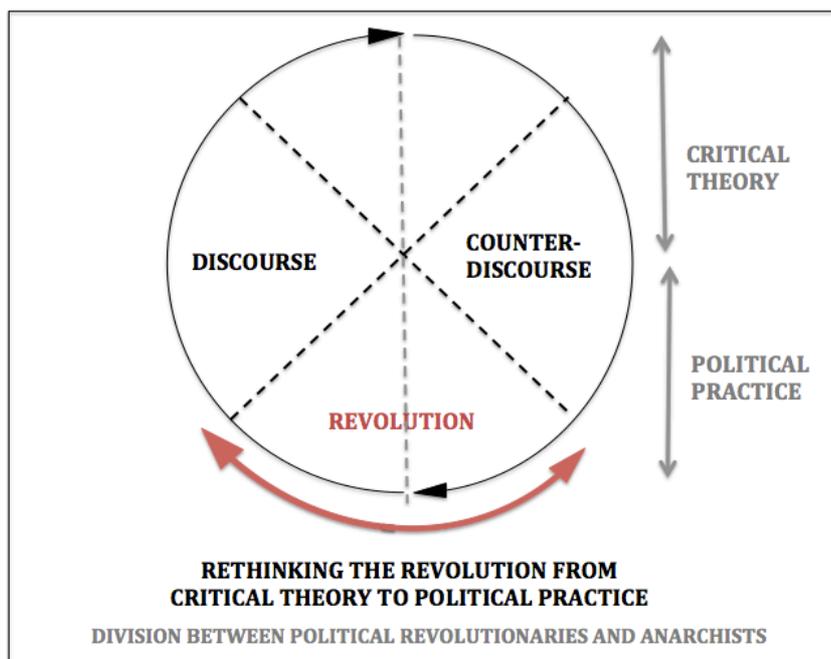
This is how, between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, anarchism progressively took shape as the libertarian wing of socialism. While communism began to grow as a predominant political institution, anarchists started questioning the dogmatism that emanated from the revolutionary ideology. In doing so, they kept acting as a counter-discourse, while communism became another well-established institutional power. To exemplify this phenomenon, we can refer to what the founding father of anarchism, Pierre

Joseph Proudhon, wrote to Karl Marx in 1846: “Let us not become the leaders of a new religion (...) even were it to be the religion of logic and reason" (Proudhon, 1846).

In Russia, after they contributed to the October and February 1917 revolution, anarchist movements joined the opposition against the Bolsheviks and fought a new kind of totalitarian power which paradoxically arose thanks to the revolution. Later on in the twentieth century, anarchists considerably contributed significantly to the resistance against Stalinism in the context of the Spanish revolution and constituted a strong opposition movement against fascism during World War II.

This perfectly illustrates the fact that every revolutionary discourse reaches a critical stage in its evolution when it ceases to act as a counter-discourse to potentially substitute itself for the dominant ideology. In order to operate this transition, it needs to be progressively institutionalised and must rely on a new set of moral values and social constructs that will constitute its ideological framework. This transition is situated at the lower pole of the discursive cycle and can be considered as an essential condition for the revolutionary discourse to be sustainable and for the revolution to be successful.

**Figure 4: Divisions between revolutionaries in the lower pole of the discursive cycle**



I will elaborate on this idea in the next section of this chapter by referring to what Habermas (1962) and Fraser (1990) conceptualise as a successful counter-power. Before doing so, however, I will briefly discuss how the distinction described above between anarchists and political revolutionaries applies to the case of the digital revolution.

### **3.1. The discursive cycle from the perspective of the digital revolution**

Although the digital age is commonly interpreted as a technological rather than a political revolution, it was considerably inspired by the libertarianism of the 1960s. In his work *The Internet Imaginaire*, Patrice Flichy (2011) shows how the counterculture of the 1960s led computer engineers to imagine a virtual utopia in which they could design and experience a more horizontal social structure. It is in this libertarian environment that the pioneers of the Web collaboratively conceived the Arpanet project and envisioned a cooperative database, which would help in designing a form of collective intelligence (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978).

In his book on Stewart Brand and digital utopianism, Fred Turner (2008) corroborates the idea that the emergent cyber-culture was considerably influenced by the counterculture of the nineteen-sixties. In addition, he emphasises the fact that, like any ideological or philosophical revolution, this technological revolution was initiated by a small highly-educated elite, driven by the idea of a more egalitarian communicative space, which would enable them to disseminate and share their knowledge.

With the liberalisation and marketization of the Internet, however, this community divided into two groups. On one hand, these ideals inspired a generation of young entrepreneurs who, while subscribing to the principle of a horizontal communicative space with free access to information, capitalised on the Internet. By developing a series of online services and platforms incorporating user-generated content, they raised the popularity of the Web and established its profitability as a two-sided market. This ultimately contributed to the

provision of more user-friendly applications, facilitating access to Internet functionalities. Yet at the same time it contributed to the rise of what Emma Murphy (2009) and Jodi Dean (2009) describe as the age of “informational” or “communicative” capitalism.

On the other hand, the libertarian ideal of what Flichy calls as “the Internet imaginaire” (2011) survived among the hacking community (Curran and Gibson, 2012). In order to draw an analogy with the relation between anarchists and political revolutionaries, I would argue that hackers represent this former category of activists, thanks to whom the revolutionary agenda resists the institutionalisation process. Similarly to the way anarchists tend to draw away from revolutionary politics, hacking is a form of counter-discourse enacted *in practice*, which remains independent from any ideological framework. One of the main characteristics of today’s hacking networks is precisely their lack of affiliation to any political institution. While some of the pioneers of the Internet gave rise to a new hegemony (Dean, 2009), hackers remained representative of what Murray Bookchin had witnessed in nineteen-seventies and described as a form of “Post-scarcity anarchism” (1986):

(...) the period in which we live closely resembles the revolutionary Enlightenment that swept through France in the eighteenth century (...) The typical institutionalized forms of public dissatisfaction—in our own day, they are orderly elections, demonstration and mass meetings—tend to give way to direct action by crowds. This shift from predictable, highly organized protests within the institutionalized framework of the existing society to sporadic, spontaneous, near insurrectionary assaults from outside (and even against) socially acceptable forms reflects a profound change in popular psychology. The "rioter" has begun to break, however partially and intuitively, with those deep-seated norms of behaviour, which traditionally weld the "masses" (Bookchin, 1986: 72).

Understanding the digital revolution in relation to other cases of ideological revolutions in history is crucial in order to determine whether and how the circulation of discourse – hence power – is fundamentally changing. As former revolutions, this technological revolution initially relied on some form of libertarian movement, which manifested itself

as the creative spirit of Flichy's internet imaginaire (2007). And similarly to the way revolutions have substituted one dominant power for another, *the digital* operated a transition from emergent to mainstream media, ensuring the success of a new generation of entrepreneurs.

This transition, which has been conceptualised as the connectivity paradigm, also led to a division between politically engaged hackers and successful computer scientists, who contributed to and benefitted from the rise of communicative capitalism. From this perspective, connectivity can also be considered as a period during which the most creative and politically engaged users come to rethink their relationship to the media. In this sense, connectivity is also and most importantly characterised by the redefinition of one's identity with regards to contesting versus embracing the new mainstream.

### **3.2. The discursive cycle from the perspective of the bourgeois public sphere**

These analogies certainly help in understanding connectivity in relation to the way discourses have always circulated in a period of revolution. In addition, they show how emerging counter-discourses may become institutionalised or remain fluid in today's media environment. However, in order to really determine what makes a sustainable counter-discourse and a successful revolution, I now turn to my model of *discursive cycle*, drawing on the ways Habermas (1962) and Fraser (1990) have envisioned a successful counter-discourse, when conceptualising the public sphere.

Habermas' public sphere represents a first attempt at mapping the discursive cycle, by investigating how counter-power is progressively incorporated into institutional discourse through the revolutionary process. Accordingly, the Habermasian public sphere – as well as its critique - becomes highly relevant when it comes to determining the *sustainability* of revolutionary discourses.

Different approaches to the concept of public sphere have each addressed the question of how critical public opinion emerges among elites or minorities and have examined how it circulates across and between these different social groups (Calhoun et al. 1992). As such, they account for different instances of discourse and remind us that democratic debate relies on a complex interplay of both official and rather marginalised voices.

Habermas is among the first social thinkers to have explored how ideas initially formulated in the margins of civil society gain legitimisation to progressively become the foundations of a new political structure. This aspect of Habermas' conceptualisation of the public sphere is, in my opinion, its biggest contribution to social theory, as it highlights a phenomenon, which constantly recurs across time and space. For that matter, I would argue that his work should primarily be applied as a model to understand the evolution of emergent discourse in various contexts.

### **3.3. Intellectual leadership in the bourgeois public sphere**

In highlighting the distinctions between the *bourgeois* and the *virtual* public spheres, researchers remind us that the former is naturally regulated by some form of intellectual leadership. As demonstrated by Nancy Fraser in her critique of the liberal public sphere (1990), Habermas conceptualises the emergence of a deliberative culture as an elitist process through which bourgeois intellectual leaders held the privilege of expressing their views publicly. The nascent public discourses of salons and coffee houses as well as the arguments emanating from the press and literature were exclusively formulated by a small educated elite able to argue rationally and experiment with democratic deliberation:

In relation to the mass of the rural population and the common "people" in the towns, of course, the public "at large" that was being formed diffusely outside the early institutions of the public was still extremely small. Elementary education, where it existed, was inferior. The proportion of illiterates, at least in Great Britain, even exceeded that of the preceding Elizabethan epoch. [...] The masses were not only largely illiterate but also so pauperized that they could not even pay for literature. [...] Nevertheless, with the emergence of the diffuse public formed in the course of the commercialization of cultural production, a new social category arose. (Habermas, 1962: 37-38)

This parameter might explain why one might easily draw an analogy between the context in which the bourgeois public sphere was formed and the conditions, in which the 2011 uprisings arose in the MENA region (Mahlouly, 2014). It also accounts for the fact that the innovative forms of political engagement that manifested themselves during the 2011 Arab uprisings are very often interpreted on the basis of Habermas' theory (Al Maghlouth et al. 2015: 13).

Due to digital divide and illiteracy, the young educated middle class that constituted a significant part of the revolutionary movement in 2011 benefitted from a similar form of intellectual leadership. Indeed, according to Breuer (2012) and Iskander (2011) digital technologies specifically contributed to the “politicization and mobilization of the young urban middle class and elites” (Breuer 2012: 28).

Similar to the situation in eighteenth century Europe observed by Habermas (1962), only a minority of the local population actively used social media on the eve of the 2011 Arab uprisings. According to the UN database, just 36.8% of the population in Tunisia and 26.7% in Egypt<sup>6</sup> were Internet users in 2010. In addition, the Arab Social Media Report published by the Dubai School of Governance (Mourtada and Salem, 2011) indicates that the average for Facebook penetration in the Arab region at the end of 2010 was only 6.77%. This suggests that pro-revolutionaries actively using social media in Tunisia and Egypt constituted a restricted community who benefitted from the economic and intellectual resources required to disseminate their political message.

Therefore simply applying Habermas' (1962) model to explain pro-revolutionary activism in Tunisia and Egypt fails to take into account a broader range of political activity emanating from the working class and aside from social media. Most importantly, whereas the bourgeois public sphere may be applied to explain cyber-activism over the years that led to the revolutionary uprisings, it does not account for the way social media relayed public debate *after* the revolution. Indeed, Internet and social media penetration continued

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations (2013) UN Data country profile, United Nations Statistics Division, <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?>

to increase considerably over the months that followed the uprisings (Salem and Mourtada: 2011):

The first three months of 2011 saw what can only be termed a substantial shift in the Arab world's usage of social media towards online social and civil mobilization online (...) the number of Facebook users has risen significantly in most Arab countries, most notably so in the countries where protests have taken place. (Salem and Mourtada, 2011: 2-4)

As a result, a broader range of citizens gained access to the political debate that revolutionary activists initiated on social media, which entirely changed the sociological landscape of this emerging public sphere.

The bourgeois public sphere is still highly relevant, however, since it describes how a minority of revolutionary thinkers who benefit from some form of intellectual leadership initiate a counter-discourse. In other words, to refer back to the terminology used by Deleuze and Foucault (1977), Habermas (1962) specifically outlines the process through which intellectuals produce a *critical theory*, which will need to be enacted in political practice to unleash the revolutionary process. For this reason, I argue that his theory accounts for the first quarter of the discursive cycle. At this stage of the cycle, the pioneers of the revolution produce the theoretical framework which will become the backbone of their counter-discourse (cf. Figure 5).

### **3.4. Beyond the bourgeois public sphere: bringing critical theory into practice**

Yet when it comes to understanding how civil society contributes to shape this counter-discourse and becomes involved in the revolutionary process, I turn now to Fraser's critique of the *bourgeois public sphere* (1990). One of the most recurrent criticisms of Habermas' model relates to what Fraser (1985) describes as an artificial distinction between the restricted sphere of politics - in which the intellectual bourgeoisie supposedly frames public opinion - and other components of civil society, such as the private sphere of the nuclear family. In her critique of Habermas' theory of communicative action (1984),

Fraser (1985) claims that individuals who remain unrepresented in the formal public sphere are an integral part of the material, economic and political reproduction of modern societies. For example, whereas Habermas would classify the female minority into the apolitical private sphere, she argues that marginalised social groups are equally crucial to the elaboration of public opinion:

(...) the roles of worker and consumer link the (official) private economy and the private family, while the roles of citizen and (later) client link the public state and the public opinion institutions. Thus Habermas provides an extremely sophisticated account of the relations between public and private institutions in classical capitalist societies. At the same time, however, his account has some weaknesses. (...) Consider first, the relations between (official) private economy and private family as mediated by the roles of worker and consumer. These roles, I submit are gendered roles. And the links they forge between family (official) economy are adumbrated as much in the medium of gender identity as in the medium of money. (Fraser, 1985: 113)

However, Fraser argues that one of the benefits of Habermas' model lies in the fact that it potentially reveals relationships of domination in the formation of the public sphere.

For instance, she demonstrates that the male-dominated public sphere only exists in opposition to the private sphere of the nuclear family as a manifestation of male dominance and female subordination in classic capitalist societies. However, acknowledging such forms of power relationships enables the overcoming of the normative distinction between private (symbolic) and public (material), while underlining to what extent these two spheres actually interfere with each other. Therefore, in Fraser's work, gender becomes a specific angle to study relationships of domination and understand how they might determine the elaboration of public opinion.

From a feminist approach, Fraser not only shows that the separation between private (symbolic) and public (material) spheres is constructed. Most importantly, she demonstrates that, as a social construct, this binary conception compartmentalises genders, artificially excluding women from the normative definition of a male-dominated political sphere:

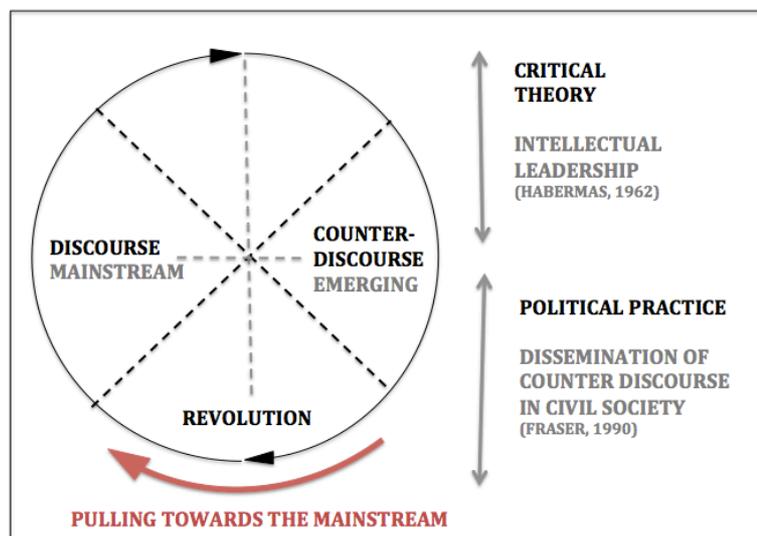
Once the gender-blindness of Habermas' model is overcome, however, all these connections come into view. It then becomes clear that feminine and masculine gender identity run like pink and blue threads through the areas of paid work, state administration, and citizenship as well as through the domain of familial and sexual relations. (Fraser, 1985: 117)

Yet although some social groups might be excluded from what we regard as the official space for public deliberation, these minority voices always find alternative mediums and public arenas through which they spread an alternative discourse. By doing so, they ultimately consolidate a counter-public (or counter-discourse), which undeniably contributes to perform the critical function of the public sphere.

(...) there were a variety of ways of accessing public life and a multiplicity of public arenas. The view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public's claim to be *the public*. (Fraser, 1990: 61)

Fraser's critique can be applied to consider a much broader range of social practices from the perspective of the Habermasian public sphere and to postulate that public opinion rather consists in the symbiotic interactions between the intellectual elite and less privileged social groups that may be subjected to a greater degree to relationships of domination.

**Figure 5: From Intellectual Leadership to Political Practice**



Most importantly, Fraser's (1990) work outlines how critical theory becomes enacted in practice in the second quarter of the discursive cycle. Not only does her model incorporate minority voices in the process through which the public sphere is shaped, but it also assumes that those unofficial (non-institutionalised) minorities act as the critical agents of the public sphere. In this regard, whereas Habermas would situate discourse and counter-discourse within the same sphere of influence, Fraser initiates a reflection on how power institutions – such as the male-dominated capitalist structure – can be (and have been) challenged by other components of the civil society:

(...) not only were there always a plurality of competing publics but the relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual. Virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech. (Fraser, 1990: 61)

Her theory draws a distinction between the process through which hegemonic discourses are constructed by power institutions and the way counter-discourses progressively deconstruct the institutionally-framed *doxa*. By rethinking the circulation of discourse beyond the distinction between private and public spheres, Fraser suggests that counter-discourses are not only produced by elites of revolutionary thinkers. In fact, they also take shape among minorities, who may not have access or be fairly represented in the bourgeois public sphere. This illustrates how critical theory becomes enacted in political practice and how an emerging counter-discourse progressively gains legitimacy and popularity amongst the masses. As such, it evidences how this emerging counter-discourse evolves towards the mainstream, from theory to practice and from the elites to the masses.

In the second quarter of the discursive cycle, the emerging counter-discourse reaches its audience and gives rise to a *counter-public*, thanks to which it will progressively gain legitimacy outside from the institutional sphere of politics. This is how Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2006) account for the natural procedure through which emerging discourses become legitimate, when considering whether the Internet contributes to a process of radicalisation. In their view (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2006), as per Fraser's theory

(1990), legitimate counter powers take shape when non-governmental actors identify themselves with the emerging ideology, consolidate a public and undertake a competition for power.

This hypothesis – previously formulated by Warner (2002) and Barnett (2003) further illustrates the fact that together, Habermas' (1962) and Fraser's (1990) theories provide a reliable framework to visualise how critical theory materialises over the first half of the discursive cycle. Once it is considered as a legitimate political or ideological argument, such a counter-discourse is more likely to be formally debated and represented in the sphere of institutional politics. In this regard, it will progressively rely on its own institutional framework and should no longer be considered as a counter-discourse. Here is precisely where one can see the discursive cycle taking shape, as some aspects of a *former* counter-discourse might now contribute to establish a (new) elite in power.

Yet, like many others (Dean, 2003; Cardon, 2010; Flichy, 2010) Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2006) suggest that the normative public sphere is no longer representative of the way discourse and counter-discourse circulate in the digital age. When it comes to determine how digital media might disturb this legitimisation process, Hoskins and O'Loughlin anticipate Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) argument, claiming that the new media ecology makes publics less predictable. As the prevailing discourse becomes more diffuse, publics appear to be more flexible and versatile, which affects the process through which counter-discourses may gain legitimacy under the conditions of the normative public sphere.

### **3.5. Rethinking the public sphere under the connectivity paradigm**

Likewise, Cardon (2010), Flichy (2010) and Dean (2003) identify different features of digital media that might affect the consolidation of a critical public sphere. From different perspectives, their works suggest that digital media renders the public sphere too chaotic and that public opinion has become too flexible to produce a sustainable critical discourse.

In his essay *Le Sacre de l'amateur* (2010), Flichy argues that, thanks to digital media, *amateurs* have gained the authorship of the public sphere. Whereas experts and

professionals were traditionally considered the only reliable reference on any questions relating to sciences, art, culture and politics digital media provided random amateurs with the opportunity to contribute to public knowledge.

Unlike the Habermasian public sphere, today's public opinion is no longer shaped by an intellectual elite and does not rely on any form of intellectual leadership. As a result, public deliberations are less likely to articulate rational and critical arguments. Most importantly, these diffused publics of amateurs tend to interact exclusively amongst each other, within communities that already share similar ideological views (Flichy, 2010: 56). As a result, citizens become less likely to challenge their perspective and develop a casual and sporadic form of political engagement driven by personal interest. Individuals partially contribute to larger social movements, without being involved in the entire political process. Simultaneously, political organisations appear to be less exclusive, which leads citizens to constantly rethink their political affiliation in relation to their personal interest.

Other researchers like Cardon (2010) or Dean (2003) argue that, beyond the fact that digital media fail at producing a critical public opinion, it contributes to legitimate the dominant discourse by producing an illusion of public sphere. According to Dean (2003), the Internet introduces a form of communicative capitalism, which maintains citizens in the position of potential consumers. In her views, democratic governance today is highly dependent on a consumption-driven entertainment culture (2003: 102) and relies on the assumption that communication technologies enhance participative democracy. As illustrated by my model of discursive cycle, Dean describes the Habermasian public sphere as a "decentralized model of sovereignty", emanating from the people, (2003: 104) that provides legitimacy for social institutions and authorities.

Yet in the context of communicative capitalism public opinion is very much driven by consumerism. Therefore, it tends to raise the legitimacy of the institutions in power without questioning or challenging them in a critical way:

This is precisely my worry about the public sphere in communicative capitalism: the technologies, the concentrations of corporate power, the

demands of financial markets, the seductions of the society of the spectacle that rule in and as the name of the public have created conditions anathema to democratic governance. The subjectless flows are sovereign – and that is the problem. (Dean, 2003: 104)

From this perspective, Dean describes the Internet as a specific kind of social infrastructure - a “zero institution” (Dean, 2003: 106) - to which different members can belong while assuming their individual identities. Collectivities and individualities are constantly confronting each other on a global scale, which makes consensus very hard to reach. In providing the feeling of belonging to a global and virtual space for deliberation, the Internet creates an illusion of freedom of speech and rational deliberation, which is sufficient to legitimate dominant ideologies.

This leads to a “neodemocracy” (Dean, 2003: 108) in which the criteria of the normative public sphere are slightly transposed. In order to develop a critical and rational public sphere, opportunities for contestation should feed a sustainable critique of the dominant political climate and lead to a fully democratic consensus. However, in the case of neodemocracies, the process of deliberation is limited to the stage of contestation. Consequently, even if information tends to be more transparent, this new form of publicity fails at stimulating an impartial political debate and maintains the hegemony of global corporations. Unlike the normative public sphere, the publicity of neodemocracies is used to enhance the credibility of corporate powers and justify decisive action.

### **3.6. Conclusion to Section 2: Anticipating the sustainability issue on the basis of Habermas public sphere**

These critiques (Dean, 2003; Cardon, 2010; Flichy, 2010) underline some of the reasons why counter-discourses are no longer sustainable under the connectivity paradigm. Overall, digital media seem to have extended consumerism to politics (Shah et al. 2007) and altered the quality of the public sphere. Despite the fact that a broader range of citizens have gained access to the public sphere, their contributions remain too sporadic, diffused and superficial to generate a substantial political opposition in the absence of any ideological framework. To illustrate this problematic in relation to my model of the

*discursive cycle*, we might say that counter-discourses are no longer sustainable because they do not manage to evolve into more institutional discourses.

Here lies the paradox that characterises power under the connectivity paradigm. This phenomenon is critical because it may prevent the process, through which institutional powers renew themselves. Admittedly, the traditional circulation of discourse (cf. *discursive cycle*) and the way counter-discourse operates under the connectivity paradigm both result in the restoration of institutional power. This partly explains why, as I will discuss, the 2011 Arab uprisings may be considered as similar to other cases of revolutions in history:

There is a risk that the Arab Spring meets the same fate as revolutions elsewhere have in the past. That is, they can often result in a greater continuity than change. The recent literature on political economy offers a convincing reason for such institutional persistence. (...) de jure reforms do not automatically result in effective change. This is because elites have remarkable ability to endure; they can reverse change or mould it in their favour. Even if old political players are replaced with new ones, this can lead simply to re-configuration of political power leaving the basic economic structure unaltered. The challenge for the Arab world is no different (...) (Malki and Awadallah, 2011: 2)

However, whereas counter-discourses originally succeeded in overthrowing the prevailing order, today's emerging discourses may, on the contrary, give more legitimacy to the leading political forces by producing an illusion of democratic debate. In fact, today's emerging – *or revolutionary* - discourses are very likely to be manipulated or distorted for two reasons.

On one hand, as I suggested earlier, they undertake a process of transition, which is inherent to every revolution: as a broader range of people become involved in the revolutionary debate, the ideological vocabulary of the revolution becomes intrinsically *fluid*. That is to say that some of the concepts that determine the founding principles of this counter-discourse – such as “freedom” or “revolution”- will evolve and may adopt a different meaning, over the course of transition from *critical theory* to *political action*. It is

also during this transition that divisions may occur between what I referred to earlier as political revolutionaries and anarchists. Overall, the evolution from emerging to mainstream and from theory to practice makes the revolutionary discourse flexible by nature.

On the other hand, as Flichy's (2010) critique suggests, the public sphere is no longer regulated by any form of intellectual leadership. The process through which revolutionaries consolidate a consistent critical theory remains superficial. The revolutionary discourse is instantly redefined and negotiated within the masses, before revolutionary thinkers might have the time to produce a sustainable ideological framework. Therefore, under the connectivity paradigm, the first half of the discursive cycle is affected to the extent that counter-discourses may easily be distorted to benefit well-established powers. Although the emerging reaches the mainstream, it remains nothing more than a *trend* that every individual interprets from his very own perspective. In this context, long-established power institutions may easily adapt the emerging discourse to benefit their own interest.

#### **4. Theoretical development, section 3: Assessing the sustainability of counter-discourse in Tunisia and Egypt**

Following on from the argument I developed in the previous section of this chapter, I argue that although digital media have often been regarded as a factor of democratisation, they tend to reinforce the leading political voices and make the opposition weak. In fact, as much as Dean's (2003) neodemocracies produce an illusion of public sphere, connectivity provides an illusion of democratisation. Connectivity intensifies the fluidity of the revolutionary discourse, which accelerates the evolution from *emerging* to *mainstream* but renders this discourse highly superficial.

As my research demonstrates, this stands out from the evolution of the revolutionary discourse in Tunisia and most particularly in Egypt. As this was described to me by one of the participants when conducting qualitative interviews in Cairo, digital media undeniably

contributed to spread every political statement “like wildfire” (Samira, cf. interview transcripts: 31). As such, it most certainly facilitated the logistics behind the January 2011 mobilisations, which led many to believe that the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique [RCD]<sup>7</sup> and military regimes had been successfully overthrown along with Ben Ali’s and Mubarak’s administrations. However, while it might have accelerated the spread of the revolutionary message over the few months that preceded and followed the uprisings, it ultimately reinforced the dominant political institutions by effecting an *alienation of the revolution*.

In Egypt, over the transition from the 2011 uprisings to the 2013 military coup, revolutionary slogans such as the famous “*Aish, al Hourya, Adla Ijtima’ya*”<sup>8</sup> were successively used by the different political movements that became involved in the post-revolutionary debate. With the success of the Freedom and Justice Party in the 2011 parliamentary elections and the victory of Mohammed Morsi in the first 2012 presidential race, it became clear that the Islamist opposition would be the first to benefit from the revolution<sup>9</sup>.

This was not surprising, given the fact that Islamist movements had proved to be the most consistent political group within the opposition. Unlike young left-wing and liberal revolutionaries, the Muslim Brotherhood relied on an ideological framework and had developed a powerful institutional structure since its creation in 1928 (Hourani, 2002). In fact, if the revolutionary uprisings had been entirely driven by the Islamists and assuming that the Freedom and Justice Party had remained in power in 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood would have succeeded in establishing a new institutional discourse.

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<sup>7</sup> RCD stands for “Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique” (in French) or “Democratic Constitutional Rally” (In English), which designate the party led by former Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali prior to the revolution.

<sup>8</sup> *Bread, freedom, social justice*

<sup>9</sup> Following the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, the first parliamentary elections to the People’s Assembly of Egypt were held between November 2011 and January 2013. The party of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice party, won 37% of the seats. In addition, the Islamist Bloc coalition led by the Salafi parti al-Nour won 27% of the seats. With a large majority of seats in the People’s Assembly, conservative parties would have a considerable influence on the composition of the Constituent Assembly and the new constitution.

However, the coup d'état on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2013 demonstrated that power had remained in the hands of the military. The counter-revolution had progressively reframed the memory of the revolution, instituting July 2013 as the historical date that marked the victory of the Egyptian people against the *Muslim Brotherhood*.

Although the political environment appeared to be less polarised in Tunisia, the Islamist opposition was also the first group to benefit from the revolutionary mobilisation, with the success of the moderate Islamist party *Ennahdha* in the election of the Constituent Assembly (October 2011). A significant ideological change was taking shape when the human-right activist and long-term opponent of Ben Ali, Moncef Marzouki, was elected president by the Constituent Assembly in December 2011.

Yet here again, the Islamist opposition was defeated by a prominent figure of the former regime – in this case, Béji Caid Esbessi, whose party Nidaa Tunis won the majority of the seats in the 2014 presidential elections. And just like Abdel Fattah el-Sissi's new military regime in Egypt, the secular party Nidaa Tunis stood out as the only powerful alternative to traditionalist parties:

Essebsi and his associates were quintessentially what Egyptians derided as “feloul” or the remnants of the old regime. (...) In Tunisia, just such a conservative-centrist party has emerged in Nidaa Tunis to challenge Ennahda and its roots are heavily in the old regime although it also boasts other supporters. (Goldberg, 2014)

This is precisely the reason why Ellis Goldberg (2014) argues that the main difference between the Tunisian and Egyptian cases lies in the fact that the Tunisian ruling elite had remained in control of the administration over the whole political crisis. Whereas Egyptian military forces had been facing conflicts of interests with left-wing, liberal and Islamist revolutionaries between 2011 and 2013, the Tunisian ruling elite had remained in power, acting as a moderator between the different political groups. From this perspective, Goldberg (2014) formulates a highly questionable and controversial argument in claiming

that these leading political institutions may be more beneficial to the democratisation process than a potentially successful revolution:

Democratization succeeded in Tunisia because the old elite was neither excluded nor subjected to the threat of political or administrative marginalization. The old elite, not revolutionaries or Islamists, proved to be the pivotal actor. (...) The idea that democracy is the last station on the revolutionary road remains seductive and it informs a certain idealized understanding of U.S. history and the process of democratization. Representative democracy itself, however, is less likely the successful conclusion of revolution and more likely the premature end of its utopian hopes and dreams. Only if nothing changes, can everything change. (Goldberg, 2014)

Although Goldberg celebrates the fact that the uprisings did not lead to any consistent ideological change, his analysis contributes to evidence the failure of the revolutionary process under the connectivity paradigm.

Most importantly, it highlights the fact that in order to develop a critical understanding of the 2011-2014 political crisis in Tunisia and Egypt, one needs to identify to what extent our perspective may be biased by a Eurocentric perspective on *democracy* and *democratisation*.

#### **4.1. Democracy and technology: the Eurocentric perspective**

This question is particularly relevant when it comes to determining the role of digital technologies in the revolutionary process, for this debate unleashes a set of assumptions on the correlation between democracy and technological development. Across the literature, experts demonstrate to what extent the media and political narratives surrounding the *Arab Spring* repeatedly conveyed the idea that social media would stimulate political and economic liberalisation in the Arab world (Christensen, 2011; Cottle, 2011; Hirst, 2012). Admittedly, a more skeptical and rather *techno-pessimistic* (Fuchs, 2012) narrative emerged as soon as the international community witnessed the success of the Islamist parties in the aftermath of the revolution. Yet from a cyber-utopian as well as from a techno-pessimistic perspective, the technological parameter has been given particular

attention. This is revealing of the fact that both democracy and technological development have been conceptualised in relation to the historical experience of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.

Consequently, one needs to identify to what extent these concepts remain ethnocentric and determined by the way neoliberal democracies are shaping the memory of the past revolutions both political and technological. One also needs to acknowledge the fact that this particular perspective has recently helped justifying foreign military interventions in the Middle East. As such, it keeps impacting the position of the international community regarding issues of radicalisation and political instability in the region.

In order to understand how the debate on democracy and technological development serves particular relationships of domination in the Middle East, it is worth referring to the Marxist critique of the Enlightenment. In their continuation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (2011), Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) demonstrate that the rationalism of the Enlightenment inspired an utilitarian form of knowledge. It substituted religious belief for another form of dogmatism, which draws on the assumption that reality can be described by a set of replicable scientific laws.

As a result, it subjected science and technology to the need of ensuring *reproducibility*, as the post-enlightenment society became industrialised. In this regard, as much as scientific progress may be retrospectively regarded as constitutive of democracy and liberalisation, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) argue that it contributes to homogenise the masses. In doing so, it defeats the original purpose of the Enlightenment, which is to set individuals free and empower them, by allowing them to explore their subjectivities:

The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself. (...) Each human being has been endowed with a self of his or her own, different from all others, so that it could all the more surely be made the same. But because that self never quite fitted the mold, enlightenment throughout the liberalistic period has always sympathised with social coercion. The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual and in the

scorn poured on the type of society which could make people into individuals. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 8-9)

This critique anticipates the fact that, in a neoliberal democracy, new relationships of domination may be justified in the name of scientific and technological progress. As such, it helps demystifying the idea according to which the Enlightenment – along with the Industrial Revolution - should be regarded as a model of technological and ideological revolution that succeeded in empowering individuals.

#### **4.2. Rethinking the relationship between democracy, technology and radicalisation**

Among others, Manuel Hinds (2003) develops a particular approach to the concept of connectivity, which entirely relies on the assumption, according to which technological innovation is a benefit for social, economic and political liberalisation. In this regard, his work is especially representative of the way one may perceive the relationship between technology and democracy from a neoliberal perspective. Yet although his conception of technological development is diametrically opposed to that of the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002), Hinds draws a relevant correlation between technological change and radicalisation.

In his book *The Triumph of flexible society: the connectivity revolution*, he argues that new radical ideologies are emerging as a reaction to globalisation and technological change. By referring to Huntington's (2002) *Clash of Civilisations*, Hinds asserts that the increasing radicalisation that became perceptible in the aftermath of September 2011, can be interpreted as a response to disruptive technological innovation:

All these disturbing events are part of the same phenomenon: the disruptions caused by a new process of technological innovations that will change our lives as deeply as the Industrial Revolution did during the last two hundred years. This new revolution was set in motion by connectivity, the power to manage complex tasks from afar in real time, an ability that the combination of computers, telecommunications, and by fast means of transportation has made possible. (Hinds, 2003:16)

In his views, connectivity is comparable to the Industrial Revolution in providing a wide range of empowering communication techniques, while generating what he describes as a reactionary response to technological progress. Similarly to the technological innovations designed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, today's connectivity initiates a new generation of conservative or radicalised movements that uphold a pessimistic perception of the industrialised world. According to Hinds, these radical ideologies would therefore fail at anticipating the sociological and economic benefits of the technological revolution they are witnessing:

When thinking that the new economy (...) would be accepted by everyone as the conveyor of a better life, we forgot the experience that we had from the Industrial Revolution. (...) Industrial Revolution brought about democracy and human rights, which in turn made possible a society that, whatever its flaws, is more advanced in terms of freedom and social cohesion than any other society in history. (...) In fact, (...) Nazism and Communism (...) were products of the same Industrial Revolution that created democracy and human rights-they emerged as alternative ways to manage the industrial society that was rising from the ashes of the feudal and mercantilist societies of preindustrial times. (Hinds, 2003: 17)

As he draws an analogy with the Industrial Revolution, Hinds perfectly illustrates to what extent one's perception of freedom and democracy can be biased by a Eurocentric perspective on the past revolutions, both political and technological.

By setting a distinction between technologically advanced and preindustrial societies in those terms, he supposes that technology systematically drives civilisations to a higher stage of evolution. Yet in this case his argument is only exemplified by referring to European history. For this reason, I would argue that his work shows how the memory of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution has shaped an ethnocentric perception of technology, which might prevent social scientists from thinking critically about connectivity.

Nevertheless, I shall raise the fact that, by investigating the relationship between technology and radicalisation, Hinds (2003) acknowledges a phenomenon, which is highly

relevant to this research, since it evidences my theory of a discursive cycle. As I came to witness the polarisation of the political debate in post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt, I became well aware of the fact that technological change is concomitant with a trend toward radicalisation. To some extent, this could be explained by the fact that technological development in general challenges the boundaries that determine one's sociocultural environment. As a result, social groups express the need to reaffirm their cultural or ideological identity.

Similarly, when it comes to conceptualising connectivity in relation to social media and digital activism, I will argue that fluid political action does not satisfy the need for a well-established ideological framework and a sustainable political change. As a result, it hardly competes with radicalised or institutionalised political movements that maintain a well-defined political identity. Radicalisation, in that sense may occur in reaction to technological change in the same way as connectivity paved the way to a new mainstream. These phenomena are comparable on the basis of my model of discursive cycle.

Yet unlike Hinds' (2003) theory, this argument relies on a more critical understanding of technological development. For that matter, it involves rethinking the model of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution from a different angle. Besides it requires considering the relationship between technology and democracy in a broader range of political and sociocultural environments.

#### **4.3. Understanding the relationship between technology and democracy from the perspective of the field**

For this purpose, across the literature on the *Arab Spring*, a post-colonial critique has emerged, which echoes the theory formulated by the Frankfurt School. From a post-colonial perspective, we inevitably come to consider to what extent imperialism, as much as capitalism, has relied on the argument of industrial and technological modernization. On that basis, this tradition helps in transcending the debate on whether digital media played a significant role in the revolutionary upheaval. Whereas other approaches would tend to

objectify technology, this critique proposes to assess *how, by whom* and *to which purposes* social media have been used (Lynch, 2011: 302). By doing so, it draws an emphasis on the political and economic interests likely to motivate this particular form of technological development and shows that digital media potentially acts as an instrument of resistance as well as a means for domination:

“(...) internet is both a product of imperialist and capitalist logics and something that is simultaneously used by millions in the struggle to resist this logics.” (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011: 1344)

Like the Marxist critique, this literature tends to focus on the power relationships at stake in technological development, instead of invoking technology like a *deus ex machina* to explain democratisation in the Middle East. Most specifically, from a post-colonial approach, questioning the technological argument enables us to emphasise other parameters that are often neglected, whilst they would help understanding the events from a less Eurocentric perspective.

For that matter, as they provide an overview of the literature covering the *Arab Spring*, Al Maghlouth et al (2015) observe that this post-colonial critique regards the 2011 events as a demonstration of the Arab people’s self-determination:

The orientalist notion of the inability of Arabs to govern themselves under democratic regimes is heavily contested, using the revolutions as evidence for political agency and self-determination. Generally, references to Said and others in this niche are set in the context of post-colonial resistance. (Al Maghlouth et al. 2015: 13)

Whereas technological determinism might diminish the significance given to human and social parameters, this particular set of studies gives credit to the political actors, who succeeded in overthrowing Mubarak’s and Ben Ali’s governments (Bayat 2010; Benhabib, 2011; Beinin, 2012). For instance, Allagui and Kuebler (2011) argue that the success of digital activism in promoting the 2011 protests is only revealing of a high level of social cohesion among members of civil society, which manifested itself both online and in the streets:

People (...) mobilized for two (...) reasons (...) The second reason (...) is the flow of networks to which people belong: networks of friends, family, work, school, and others of interest (such as the media). These networks create a space, or in Bowles terms (2006), territories for interaction and *strong reciprocity* based on an altruistic sharing behavior. The Arab movements proved the motivating power of social relations for social activism. The solidarity among members of networks challenged dictators, their online censors, and the offline police. (Allagui and Kuebler, 2011: 1436)

But most importantly, this post-colonial critique helps resetting the discussion on technology and democracy in the particular context of the MENA region. As such, it highlights a broader range of factors likely to stimulate or interfere with the democratisation process, which helps rethinking the relationship between technology and democracy from the perspective of the field.

For instance, a specific set of research considers digital activism in relation to other forms of political action, suggesting that social media and street activism proved to have a symbiotic relationship (Aouragh & Alexander 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012). Other studies examine how traditional mass media relayed the events originally reported via social media (Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Lynch, 2011).

These works propose to understand digital activism in combination with other variables that might have determined the outcome of the 2011 protests (Lopes de Souza and Lipietz, 2011; 2012). In that respect, they inevitably leads to a rethink of the assumption, according to which social media and technology per se generated significant social and political change, in a way that perfectly resonates with the historical experience of the Enlightenment. Therefore, similarly to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique, they prompt the thought that one should not rely on an idealised memory of the Enlightenment to anticipate the challenges for democratisation in the Arab region.

With this in mind, it is crucial to outline what distinguishes the Egyptian and Tunisian cases from other examples of political mobilisations involving activism in the early 2010s. In order to build theory on such forms of *connective actions* (Bennett and Segerber, 2012),

researchers have drawn comparisons between the Arab uprisings and the Indignados movement in Spain, the London riots, the 2011 protests in Greece and the Occupy Wall Street protest (Castells, 2012; Mason, 2012). In doing so, they have identified similarities between these events, sometimes arguing that local activist networks are connected on the transnational scale (Castells, 2012 ; Mason, 2012).

The comparative approach may seem particularly appropriate when studying the Arab uprisings from the perspective of media studies or political sciences. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that pro-revolutionary cyber-activism in Tunisia and Egypt remains significantly different from the way digital activism operates in neoliberal democracies. Although cyber-activist networks are sporadically interconnected, their political environments bring them to develop different views on how social media should benefit the political debate.

Here I intend to distinguish hacking and web-activism in societies where the cyberspace is an entirely liberalised market from digital activism in the Arab world. While the former contests the fact that private agencies are gaining control over the way information circulates online, the latter sees the Internet as an alternative to state censorship.

On one hand, hacking networks in technologically literate countries (Coleman, 2011) are concerned about the traceability and commercialisation of users' personal data. On the other hand, activism in the MENA region preceded the emergence of digital technologies and attempts to stimulate the liberalisation of discourse to fight against repressive regimes. In the first case, digital devices are both the cause and the object of political action (Curran and Gibson, 2012), whereas in the second case, online tools are only the vehicles of a much bigger political agenda. Seyla Benhabib (2011) clearly underlines these distinctions, when comparing different cases of protests and revolutionary upheaval around the world:

(...) the Wisconsin protesters and the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionaries are battling for different goals: the first are resisting the further pacification and humiliation of a citizenry, nearly converted into docile and hopeless homebodies by the ravages of American and global financial capitalism visited

upon them in the last twenty years. Arab revolutionaries are struggling for democratic freedoms, a free public sphere, and joining the contemporary world after decades of lies, isolation and deception. (Benhabib , 2011: 1)

In fact, the divergences between these two forms of mobilisation are fundamental. When online activism is meant to target web corporations, the prerogative for anonymity is essential, because it is regarded as a way to preserve Internet users' privacy (Coleman, 2011: 513). These particular types of activist networks are therefore more likely to remain fluid and avoid any political affiliation.

As for cyber-activism in the democratising Middle East, users' anonymity is not the end but the means of the struggle for freedom of expression. In this context, the initial purpose of anonymous political action is to circumvent repression and to enable minority voices to be heard in the public sphere. Yet the real challenge that members of the activist community are facing in the Arab world is to ultimately enable individual stakeholders to disclose their identity as they defend their personal views and uphold an alternative opinion. Their concern primarily lies in the issue of *transparency*, rather than *privacy*.

In that sense, one could easily argue that pro-revolutionary activists in Tunisia and Egypt were initially more likely to consolidate a sustainable ideological framework. Most revolutionaries were politicised before becoming web-activists. In spite of the fact that the revolution ultimately failed at federating the opposition, Islamist, left-wing and liberal revolutionaries related to different yet specific ideological discourses. Each of these ideologies relied on a sufficiently consistent theory to ensure a sustainable political transition. In this regard, we need to examine whether digital technologies contributed to raise confusion and make those potentially successful counter-discourses more fluid and likely to be hijacked. For unlike what Benhabib predicted in 2011, the revolution was hijacked and this was not only due to the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood:

(...) many commentators (...) are convinced that these revolutions will be hijacked and transformed into theocracies. These are not only deeply partisan speculations, motivated by equally deep-seated cultural prejudice against Muslims and their capacity for self-governance. They are also deeply anti-political speculations of weary elites, who have forgotten the civic republican

contentiousness out of which their own democracies once emerged. In Egypt as well as Tunisia, hard negotiations and confrontations will now start among the many groups who participated in the revolution. And the number of young men and women who are still guarding their public spheres in these countries, by showing up in numbers on the streets, shows that they are quite aware that respect for the past suffering and resistance of members of the older generation of Muslim Brothers, may “hijack” their revolution. (Benhabib , 2011: 2)

Rethinking the technological parameter critically would precisely contribute to explain why the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions failed, although they involved consistent ideological views that could have been successfully confronted in a democratic debate.

#### **4.4. Conclusion to Section 2: beyond the Eurocentric perspective**

Assessing the role of digital activism in the 2011 Arab uprisings unleashed a set of assumptions on the relationship between democracy and technological development. These assumptions often reflect a rather Eurocentric understanding of the democratisation process, especially when they are founded on the model of the Enlightenment. As the Marxist critique of the Enlightenment would suggest, assuming a correlation between technological progress and democracy also stimulated the development of a neoliberal economy in industrialised countries. Such assumptions are therefore mostly representative of the way democracy is understood in Western neoliberal societies:

For most Western observers, hopes for transformation on the back of the Arab Spring were squarely pinned on the model of Western democracies. But, as the Graeco-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis reminds us, this model—that of ‘liberal oligarchies’—can only offer reform of the old regime; not a deeply renewed society. (Lipietz and Lopes de Souza, 2012: 356)

This phenomenon constitutes a considerable bias when it comes to discussing the relationship between technology and democracy in the Middle East. Only by acknowledging this can we develop a critical understanding of the role played by digital media in the post-revolutionary debate. This not only explains why so many studies initially described social media as a tool for revolutionary resistance. It also shows that reconsidering the Arab uprisings from a less ethnocentric perspective helps us to be more critical in relation to the way social media might scatter and dissolve emerging counter-discourses in neoliberal democracies.

## 5. Methodology: A nexus analysis based on four empirical strands

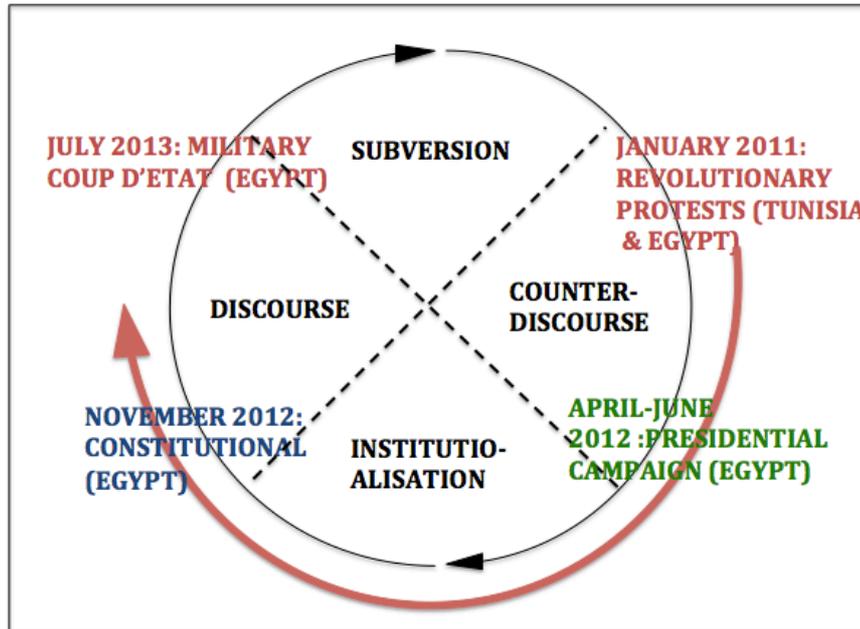
In order to map the evolution from emergent to institutionalised discourse, this research is based on the nexus analysis model of Scollon and Scollon (2004). This particular type of discourse analysis (DA) maps the transformation of a discourse over time and across different media environments. For this purpose, it involves a multimodal data set and requires the researcher to experience some of the social practices through which discourse is mediated. Combining the ethnographic approach with a multimodal DA enables us to understand how these practices may further establish or challenge the way power relationships take shape in each of the media environments considered.

My nexus analysis relies on four empirical strands and four data sets that relate to different stages of the post-revolutionary debate in Tunisia and Egypt. These four empirical strands, which will be outlined in each of my four empirical chapters, also explore different deliberative practices likely to have shaped both emerging and institutionalised discourses.

**Table 1: Research Design**

<b>NEXUS ANALYSIS</b> (MULTIMODAL CDA DESIGNED TO MAP THE EVOLUTION OF DISCOURSE OVER TIME AND ACROSS MEDIA)	
<b>VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY THREE DATA SETS</b>	<b>FIELDWORK ETHNOGRAPHY ONE DATA SET</b>
CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: ACTIVIST BLOGOSPHERE (TUNISIA AND EGYPT)	FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS: EGYPTIAN ACTIVISTS, JOURNALISTS AND CITIZENS ENGAGED ON SOCIAL MEDIA
DATA VISUALISATION AND COMPUTERISED CONTENT ANALYSIS: TWITTER DATASET	
CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS: SAMPLE FROM E- CONSULTATION PLATFORM	

**Figure 6: Mapping the evolution of the post-revolutionary debate in time**



1. The first empirical strand covers the period between 2011 and 2013. This study consists of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) conducted on a sample from the Tunisian and Egyptian blogospheres. The data set essentially included bloggers already involved in the revolutionary opposition and actively sharing their political views online prior to the 2011 uprisings. The data set includes blog articles posted in three different languages (Arabic, English and French), which provides an overview of how activists reported the 2011-2013 political crisis depending on the audience they intended to reach (national audience, diaspora, foreign press or international community).

Among the four empirical strands of this research, this discourse analysis is the only empirical chapter including data collected in Tunisia as well as in Egypt. Whereas the research originally intended to conduct an online ethnography in Tunisia, the virtual ethnography did not allow me to recruit as many participants as my fieldwork in Egypt. As I will argue when reflecting on the limitations of my research, this revealed that virtual ethnography is not always suitable in a context of political repression.

2. The second empirical strand covers the 2012 presidential campaign in Egypt. In order to see how participative media have been used in more institutionalised forms of politics; this study investigates how presidential candidates – as representatives of the leading parties and ideologies in competition – incorporated digital media into their campaigning strategy.

Firstly, it assesses the visibility of the five leading candidates online and over the period of the presidential race, by using the following data visualisation tools: R-Shief and Google Trends. These freely available applications are designed to analyse data collected from Twitter or Google respectively. They enable computerised content analysis and visualise the frequency of a term over large databases of tweets or Google searches.

In addition, this empirical chapter explores how candidates with different ideological backgrounds have incorporated social media into their campaigning strategy. For this purpose, it examines a selection of tweets produced by the most visible and proactive Twitter users among the five presidential candidates. By making an inventory of the themes addressed in candidates' tweets, this study leads me to discuss how the different political leaders included features of the revolutionary discourse into their campaigning strategy.

3. The third corpus illustrates some aspects of the 2012 constitutional debate in Egypt, which took place as former president Mohammed Morsi submitted the first constitutional draft to a referendum after the elections. This empirical strand consists of both a thematic and critical discourse analysis of a sample of comments posted on the Dostour Sharek e-consultation platform. The Dostour Sharek project was designed on the occasion of the 2012 constitutional referendum to stimulate participation in the referendum and enable citizens to comment on new constitutional articles as they were drafted by the constituent assembly.

In addition to the sample of comments analysed, this empirical chapter outlines the findings of face-to-face interviews conducted with two stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Dostour Sharek project. Those interviews took place during the time of my fieldwork in Cairo and involved a different questionnaire to the one designed for the ethnography. This alternative questionnaire was intended to further investigate the way the e-participation project had been computed and administered.

4. The fourth and final empirical study consists of a set of 14 qualitative interviews and 6 informal conversations conducted in the field with activists, political actors and citizens actively using social media. The fieldwork took place between September and November 2014 in affiliation with the American University in Cairo.

The original research design also involved a set of telephone interviews with Tunisian activists and political actors engaged in a citizen-led initiative advocating open-data policy and transparency. This network of Tunisian citizens included different kinds of political actors active on social media and updated a public Facebook page on which users commented on political events on a regular basis. Following the activity of the group and interacting virtually with some of the participants led me to recruit Tunisian participants for telephone interviews. This allowed me to approach the Tunisian field, in spite of the fact that the financial resources allocated to this research did not enable me to conduct a second period of fieldwork in Tunisia. As I will discuss in this chapter, however, recruiting interviewees online proved to be highly challenging as in the context of my fieldwork. As a consequence, only a few interviews with Tunisian participants were recorded and transcribed.

In this chapter, I will first introduce a reflection on how relativistic research and critical theory in particular is comparable to counter-discourse and how our ontological perspective as social scientists may relate to our relationship with power. I will discuss the

fact that a critical approach requires the researcher to embrace the subjective dimension of his or her research and often generates a process of introspection. This will lead me to reflect on my personal background and to comment on how it may have shaped my understanding of the field.

I will then elaborate on Scollon and Scollon's (2004) nexus analysis approach, defining it as particular type of critical discourse analysis (CDA). For this purpose, I will briefly refer to four theoretical assumptions that have considerably influenced discursive analyses and outline some of the characteristics of nexus analysis. I will comment on how computerised research methods such as large-scale textual analysis and data visualisation may contribute to DA or CDA. Finally, I will discuss the benefits of combining virtual and fieldwork ethnography.

I will conclude this chapter by presenting each of my four empirical strands, exposing data samples and commenting on the ethical concerns encountered.

### **5.1. Shifting ontological framework: constructing or deconstructive a normative vision of the world**

Like critical thinkers and political activists, researchers may come to reconsider their position with regards to normative and hegemonic discourses when adopting a specific ontological approach. In fact, one could easily argue that science is comparable to political discourse in that it answers to the need of successively *constructing* and *deconstructing* the concepts designed to interpret our physical environment as well as our social reality.

Ever since Ancient Greece, starting with the philosophical division between Plato and Aristotle, all the disciplines, traditions, myths and religions that claimed to understand our physical reality attempted at either *modifying* or *demythifying* the world. By using this terminology, I intend to differentiate utilitarian forms of science from what I would define as a rather introspective scientific approach. Admittedly, all theories ultimately aspire to having a strong impact on society. However, research relying on a positivist ontology

intend to identify replicable scientific laws, which are more likely to have a direct application in the world. Constructivists would argue that this ontological stance is utilitarian, in that it produces normative concepts, which reinforce the assumption that reality is objective, hence unique and exclusive. Therefore, this type of science potentially helps in consolidating dominant discourses.

Alternatively, a relativistic ontological approach supposes that reality is pluralistic and subjective. In that respect it leads to more introspective forms of research, since it involves a reflection on how scientific discourses might challenge prevailing assumptions. Not only does it require from the researcher to identify how his or her perspective might determine the outcome of the study, but it also allows this perspective to contradict the dominant discourse. For that matter, it is more likely to resonate with emerging or alternative perceptions of reality, which makes this ontological stance potentially less instrumental to power. Such forms of critical and introspective science are therefore comparable to counter-discourse in that it tends to *deconstruct* normative concepts and gives credit to alternative perceptions of reality that may not conform with the prevailing *doxa*.

From that perspective, a particular ontological and epistemological stance somehow reflects one's relationship to power as well as one's conception of the relation between knowledge and power. To some extent, all scientific approaches claim to *modify* the world. Yet interpretivism and critical theory in particular aspire at changing the world by *demystifying* its most common presumptions.

Critical theorists are especially aware of their responsibility with regards to power and to the circulation of discourse. In this regard their relativism almost acts as a form of political resistance. An example of this phenomenon can be found in the way many scientists suddenly developed more relativistic theories over the second half of the twentieth century, almost as a response to the increasingly radicalised political environment.

Aside from the fact that a Marxist critical theory emerged in the field of social sciences, natural sciences came to formulate the idea that the reality observed could be experienced

and described subjectively. Hypotheses such as Einstein's theory of relativity or Heisenberg's uncertainty principle arose when hard science had become subjected to war and industrialisation. In such a context, researchers were more likely to question whether their responsibility resided in demystifying or further establishing the ideological and technological tools that would be used in the struggle for power.

This brief digression shall precisely illustrate the fact that scientific discourse circulates in a way that is very similar to political discourse and that our ontological approach is, to some extent, revealing of our relationship to power. In this research, I intend to contribute to the literature on connectivity and the Arab uprisings by developing a critical reflection on the relation between technology, power and democracy. This precisely involves a process of introspection, thanks to which I came to understand how my personal experience might have determined the outcome of this research.

Identifying how my personal background would impact on my perception of the field was especially important, when conducting a nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon, 2004). Unlike traditional DA, nexus analysis primarily focuses on the historical body of the participants and social actors involved in the research. Such an approach consists of an ethnographic study of discourse, which requires the researcher to be embedded in a network of social and discursive practices (*the nexus of practice*). Similarly to a participant observation, a nexus analyst identifies variables and maps the object of his or her study by engaging with social actors, within their own environment. He or she assesses to what extent the personal experience and preliminary assumptions of each agent interfere with the way discourses progressively take shape. By doing so, the researcher comes to formulate his or her own historical body, which accounts for the way his or her perspective might affect the nexus of practice:

Whatever issue you study, you will become deeply involved with it. The first place to look for that issue is in your own life, your own actions, and your own value system. (Scollon and Scollon: 2004:154)

For this reason, I will now briefly comment on my personal background and examine how it might have influenced both my interpretation of the literature and my experience of the field.

## **5.2. Research and Introspection: Historical body of the researcher**

I was born in Switzerland in a multicultural family, Swiss from my father and Moroccan from my mother. She was a Moroccan immigrant, who left her country during the reign of the King Hassan II after working as a nurse for various humanitarian organisations. Although she had studied in French schools, during the protectorate (1912-1956), she was part of the Moroccan left-wing intelligentsia in the late 1960s and personally suffered from the authoritarian regime.

This, along with the fact that she was among the first generation of economically independent women in the country convinced her to complete her higher education in Switzerland, where she became a social worker and met my father. For many reasons, I believe her to be representative of the way the generation that witnessed the transition from colonialism to Arab nationalism came to conciliate different cultural identities.

My grandfather had the opportunity to work as a translator and civil servant for French institutions and she was one of the first Moroccan children, who benefitted from the education system provided by the ruling elite. In that regard, she was part of a privileged minority that had access to education and gravitated within what was regarded as *the* sphere of power. Unlike the majority of young Moroccan women, she had been introduced very early to the set of behaviour patterns, beliefs and common knowledge shared by the members of the colonial hegemony.

To a certain extent, this artificial cultural heritage raised her confidence, by giving her the feeling of partly belonging to what was regarded as the avant-gardist or modernist youth. On the other hand, she was considered as part of a minority by the surrounding colonial community and was unable to fully express or uphold her original cultural identity within

this particular environment. Simultaneously, she was expected to conform to Moroccan traditions and with regards to the Islamic values she had been taught at home. Consequently, she became well aware of the alienating effect of receiving a French education and being taught the ideals of the Enlightenment while witnessing multiple forms of imperialism as they manifested themselves in the Maghreb region.

As she became politically engaged, she expressed as much criticism with regards to the authority of the French protectorate as to the monarchy. At the time of Arab nationalism, her generation continued to experience confrontations between tradition and modernity and had attempted to formulate libertarian ideals as different political and ideological discourses were competing for legitimacy.

The reason why her story is relevant to my research lies in the way her experience as a political dissident and as an immigrant might have affected my understanding of the field. The way I came to experience my Arab identity as a second-generation immigrant from a mixed family is limited. However, I believe that this is precisely what led me to understand to what extent *the Arab identity* as such is ambivalent.

On the basis of my background in Middle Eastern studies, I would argue that the term “Arab” - as it is commonly applied to designate the Arab region – is hardly definable and often misleading. Since the beginning of Pan-Arabism, the term has always been the constant object of a debate on what essentially determines the Arab identity. This term however applies to a multitude of minorities that continue to uphold their ethnic, religious or linguistic independence, which intensifies identity politics. Colonialism generated a crisis of identity to which both Arab nationalism and Pan-Islamism attempted to respond and which the Arab people often came to conciliate multiple cultural heritages. This was most certainly emphasised by sectarianism, ethnic conflicts and economic migration throughout the second half of the twentieth century. For those reasons, we could easily argue that the Arab identity itself remains inherently *fluid*: it resists any normative definition, while serving multiple institutional discourses.

Personally, I witnessed the way my mother came to navigate between different cultural repertoires to defend her identity, as a politically engaged Muslim woman opposed to the patriarchal and traditionalist environment in which she had been raised. On one hand, she was deeply attached to the notions of individual freedom and to some of the liberal ideals that she was taught at school and by the French colonial administration. On the other hand, she was keen to rediscover and advocate some of the socialist principles that accompanied the development of Arab nationalism, as Arab countries progressively recovered their independence between the 1950s and 1960s. I believe that these different discourses sometimes provided her with diverging understandings of the notion of development, freedom, social equity and democracy.

When it comes to my own background, I would say that I came to question my identity as a second-generation immigrant. As a child, I became aware that we belonged to a community of immigrants by interacting with other members of the Arab diaspora and through the relationship I had with my relatives in our country of origin. But most importantly, I came to perceive a significant cultural shift in the educative approach of my parents as well as between the local practices and the traditional values or references shared by the members of the diaspora.

It became essential for me to explain these differences, which motivated my interest in Middle Eastern studies. However, this proved to be a very artificial way to rediscover my culture, since I had not been entirely raised in an Arab and Islamic environment. My experience was symmetrically opposed to my mother's, I was hopelessly trying to recover a part of our identity that we both felt was missing.

Yet her nostalgia was due to the fact that she had been driven to dismiss her origins, whereas I was spontaneously driven towards this culture to which I did not entirely belong. This is probably the reason why my background provided me with an extremely deep and empirical understanding of the struggles that occur on the individual and social scale, when it comes to define *shifting identities* and *fluid discourses*. More specifically, my perspective on the question of immigration as a result of colonisation has made me very

sensitive to the ideological conflicts that accompany these two phenomena. In this regard, it appears to be an extremely relevant tool to address the debate on the democratisation of the Arab world.

As argued earlier, discussing to what extent the 2011 Arab uprisings were a step towards democratisation is extremely challenging, because it requires determining to what extent today's conception of democracy is culturally determined. Such a reflection involves the ability to navigate between different cultural and ideological frameworks. For this reason, I believe that my potential contribution to the field lies precisely in the ability to understand how discourses become fluid when identities are shifting. My personal experience has led me to witness how those who rely on such flexible discourses remain vulnerable, despite their ability to resist a normative and unilateral conception of the world.

### **5.3. Nexus Analysis: mapping the evolution of discourse over time**

Nexus analysis is comparable to traditional CDA in that it attempts to demystify power relationships by comparing different communicative practices. Scollon and Scollon (2004) develop this approach as part of their ethnographic study of Native Alaskan communities, in order to assess whether emails and instant messaging affect the way discourse circulates between the academic institution and the local population.

Like Scollon and Scollon's (2004) original study, every nexus analysis involves a multimodal data set and intends to determine how new communication devices may challenge institutional discourses. As they go through the process of collecting and analysing the data, researchers proceed to both a virtual and traditional ethnography, thanks to which they identify and experience a range of communicative practices. These constitute what Scollon and Scollon (2004) refer to as a *nexus of practices*. Mapping the nexus of practices explains how power relationships are materialised in everyday social interactions.

In their work, Scollon and Scollon (2004) analyse how emails and instant messaging modify interactions between students and university staff. They describe the university classroom, designed on the model of the panopticon, as a medium of institutional discourse. This particular setting, which establishes the authority of the teacher is substituted for a more straightforward form of interaction with online teaching. Scollon and Scollon (2004) develop their methodology in order to discuss this particular hypothesis.

Nexus analysis is therefore highly appropriate when it comes to determining whether new media can transform the consolidation of institutional discourses. As such, it draws on many other discursive approaches and most particularly relies on CDA. For this reason, I will now briefly refer to some of the post-structuralist concepts that inspired CDA in order to set the methodological background of *nexus analysis*.

#### **5.4. From Critical Discourse Analysis to Nexus Analysis**

Among other discursive approaches, CDA aims at uncovering how discourse – as it is shaped by power institutions – establishes a prevailing ideology, while generating particular relationships of domination. A number of key thinkers from social sciences and linguistics such as Althusser, Bakhtin, Gramsci, Habermas and Volosinov have provided new theoretical grounds on which to apply this method. In addition, this tradition is significantly influenced by the work of Foucault (O’Halloran, 2003: 11).

The purpose of CDA is also to reflect the performativity of language and show to what extent social action can be determined by discourse. Therefore, in accordance with Bourdieu’s sociological perspective on language (1991), CDA focuses on the social function of discourse. Accordingly, the context of a social interaction has a considerable impact on meaning and should be carefully considered by critical discourse analysts. This requires determining which common knowledge and sociocultural framework are reactivated by the instance of discourse. As such it aims to reveal some aspect of our social reality that may be mystified by discourse, as a vehicle for power.

When it comes to contextualising a speech, interaction or a text, Bloor and Bloor distinguish the “context of culture” (2007:52) (the sociological status of participants, their accent and cultural background) from the “context of situation” (2007:26) (the setting, topic and moment of the interaction as well as the medium through which it occurs). Additionally, the researcher needs to outline the institutional framework in which the discourse is produced as well as all the social practices that may reveal or reaffirm relationships of domination. This can be achieved by identifying the stances, ideological position and attitudes of the speakers or instances of discourse.

Among the social theorists, who laid the basis for the development of CDA, I shall refer to Nietzsche (2008), Foucault (1971), Bourdieu (1991) and Bakhtin (1984), who respectively emphasise different aspects of the relationship between language and power. Not to mention the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure and the contribution of linguistic, semiology and semiotics, Nietzsche was among the first social thinkers to refer to language in order to demonstrate that social reality is subjectively constructed. In his *Genealogy of Morality* (2008), he argues that language is historically and culturally determined and therefore essentially relies on social conventions. Yet science inevitably transposes the naturalistic world into language. This leads him to formulate a similar argument as the one advanced by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (2011), according to which pretending at communicating a universal and positive truth through language meets the need to control the foundations of our social reality.

Any form of dogmatic discourse, including the scientific one, denies relativity and acts as a claim for power. Consequently, knowledge, language and power are closely interrelated. One could argue that Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality* already sets out the premises for CDA as it postulates that human knowledge and moral values are conditioned by a set of dogmatic discourses that hide the relative nature of our social reality. The only difference between Nietzsche’s genealogy and critical theory as it became constitutive of the Marxist, postcolonial or feminist critiques lies in the fact that it does not have any specific political purpose.

Indeed, unlike Foucault and Deleuze (1977) and other pioneers of CDA, Nietzsche does not insist on the need to contest power relationships as they manifest themselves in language:

But is genealogy an ‘immanent critique’, as Owen suggests? Certainly, it is not an ‘immanent critique’ in the Hegelian, Marxist, or even Habermasian sense. The idea of an ‘immanent critique’ is specifically associated with critical theory, whose purpose is to philosophically articulate what ‘is there’ latently in order to enlighten social agents, thereby enabling them to understand their ‘true’ condition. By contrast, for Nietzsche, there is nothing ‘there’ awaiting to be discovered; rather, the nature of every past event is decided by the concerns of the present moment and the actor who performs the genealogical analysis. (Sembou, 2011: 15)

Foucault further elaborates on the relationship between knowledge, power and language as he develops the concept of discourse. This notion was mostly defined in his lecture *The Order of Discourse* (1971), in which he explores how power institutions, including academia, enact their domination through discourse and demonstrates that discourse is fully constitutive of any institutional framework. Yet in his views, demystifying power relationships should essentially contribute to question dominant ideologies and relay minority voices. With a critical approach to discourse, social theory is able to *change the world by demystifying it* and develops its own form of counter-discourse.

Simultaneously to the question of how discourse relates to power, other social thinkers have investigated the process through which the social constructs that compose *the* prevailing discourse progressively take shape. In this regard, the work of Bourdieu (1991) has played a significant part in defining discourse as a social practice. As I will discuss, this question appears to be highly relevant when it comes to identifying *the instance of discourse* as well as the evolution of discourse over time, as it is the case in a *nexus analysis*. But most importantly, it helps in conceptualising discourse in the age of participative media, as a broader diversity of social actors is now likely to determine dominant narratives and as the production (co-construction) of those narratives is constantly ongoing.

To define discourse as a social practice rather than as a means for power, Bourdieu (1991) questions de Saussure's famous assumption that the relationship between *signifying* and *signifier* is entirely arbitrary (Grenfell, 2010; Myles, 2013: 10). In his views, this relationship is in fact determined by our sociocultural environment, which suggests that discourse is essentially a practice through which social groups redefine themselves and perform their reality.

According to Bourdieu, language may be considered as a symbolic power as it has been codified and institutionalized through grammar and thanks to education. However the way societies have progressively created meaning through language is a sociological phenomenon. This is also the reason why language – as a social practice as well as a means of symbolic power – is organic, and proves to be constantly changing and evolving.

Bourdieu paves the way for nexus analysis, by suggesting that one should study the evolution of a discourse over time. Together, Foucault's (1971) and Bourdieu's (1991) theories lead to a conceptualisation of discourse as both an instrument of power and a constantly evolving social practice. Discourse is therefore always likely to change and benefit different social groups, which further exemplifies my model of the discursive cycle.

In keeping with the notion of language as social practice is the idea that narratives are *polyphonic* and that the instance of discourse is sometimes plural and unclearly defined. This question was explored long before the emergence of participative media in the field of literary studies. Among others, Bakhtin (1984) largely contributed significantly to this literature by developing his theory of *dialogism*, which inspired the concept of *intertextuality* among postmodernist theorists. Dialogism and intertextuality in particular consider a text as part of a large history of texts previously written and therefore follows on from an entire body of discourses. This notion has inevitably become crucial to CDA, as it allows the researcher to demonstrate that certain aspects of a discourse are commonly

shared and may contribute to reactivate the social constructs that legitimate the prevailing *doxa*:

Intertextuality is a discourse process, which is closely linked to the notions [...] of recreation, reiteration and interpretation. Within CDA, intertextual analysis has two main functions: (1) it plays an important role in revealing writers' and speakers' strategies in reinforcing or reformulating ideas and beliefs; and (2) it can reveal traces of dominant ideology or evidence of ideological struggle and cultural changes. (Bloor and Boor, 2007: 54)

Intertextual analysis also appears to be highly relevant in the age of digital media, given that discourse has now become even more polyphonic.

Most importantly, Bakhtin's intertextuality, along with Bourdieu's definition of discourse as a social practice, suggests that one can identify the features of a dominant discourse, whenever the instance of discourse is *plural and unclearly defined*. In other words, despite the fact that CDA is commonly applied to analyse the way power institutions communicate, one may uncover dominant discourses by examining a broader range of social interactions:

First, structure, form, function, and meaning are seen not as immanent features of discourse but as products of an ongoing process of producing and receiving discourse. Second, this process is not centered in the speech event or creation of a written text itself, but lies in its interface with at least one other utterance. (Briggs and Bauman, 1992: 146)

This alternative approach may in fact be more revealing of the way power relationships are reactivated or challenged by all the actors involved in the process of shaping public opinion.

Among other theorists across the fields of linguistics, sociology and literary studies, Nietzsche, Foucault, Bourdieu and Bakhtin respectively contributed to outline the founding principles of DA and CDA. Yet the reason why I choose to refer to their work in order to introduce nexus analysis is because they focus on the relationship between discourse and power as well as the potential evolution of discourse over time.

The triangulation between *language, power* and *discourse as an ongoing social practice* is crucial to analyse how the logics behind power relationships may change as the volume of social interactions increases. Articulating those concepts explains why CDA and nexus analysis are appropriate to understanding whether connectivity affects or accelerates the natural evolution of discourse and power relationships.

As mentioned earlier, CDA and nexus analysis share many similarities. Like Foucault, Scollon & Scollon (2004) postulate that discursive interactions represent the structural unit of social powers and contribute to shape and establish the structure and internal regulations of our institutions. Yet whereas a Foucauldian approach would focus on the macro structure of discourse and power, a nexus analysis suggests that sociological phenomena can be explained by studying social interactions on the micro level. In fact, struggles over power manifest themselves as a network of discursive and semiotics patterns that can be observed on a smaller scale:

A nexus analysis is a way to strategize unifying [unfolding moments of social interaction and a much broader socio-political-cultural analysis of the relationships among social groups and power interests]. We believe that the broader social issues are ultimately grounded in the micro-actions of social interactions and conversely, the most mundane of micro-actions are nexus through which the largest cycles of social organization and activity circulate. (Scollon & Scollon, 2004 : 8)

In other words, nexus analysis introduces a bottom-up perspective to the understanding of discourse, which might be particularly appropriate to study new communicative behaviors in a digital environment.

In addition to the fact that a nexus analysis intends to demystify power relationships, it draws on Bakhtin's intertextuality, by conceptualizing discourse as *polyphonic*:

A social action takes place as an intersection or nexus of some aggregate of discourses [...] – *the discourse in place*, some social arrangement by which people come together in social groups (a meeting, a conversation, a chance

contact, a queue) – *the interaction order*, and the life experiences of individual social actors – *the historical body*. (Scollon and Scollon, 2004: 19)

Furthermore, like Bourdieu, Scollon and Scollon (2004) suggest that discourse is a social practice:

In order to develop the argument that discourse analysis is itself a form of social action, we need to show how discourse (in both the sense of language in use and the sense of the broader social discourses) is integrated within the actions of people in the ordinary conduct of their lives. (Scollon and Scollon, 2004:15)

In Scollon and Scollon's terms, the Foucauldian discourse can be described as a *nexus of practice*. Like ethnographers, researchers should be fully involved in this nexus of practice to deconstruct its internal structure.

Yet in order to remain critical with regards to discourse in the age of digital media, I believe that nexus analysts will have to face new challenges that had not been anticipated by Scollon and Scollon in 2004. Indeed, with the rise of big data and the increasing complexity of social media, social scientists now have access to a range of methodological tools to select and analyse meaningful data samples online. Paradoxically, when conducting virtual ethnography, researchers often come to use computerised methods that, unlike CDA, originally rely on a more naturalistic conception of discourse and language.

### **5.5. A naturalistic approach of discourse: towards computerised textual analyses**

Discourse analysis was also influenced by various schools of thought in the field of language cognition, such as logical empiricism, symbolism or generative grammar. Yet unlike CDA, this tradition intended to apply replicable logics based on grammatical structures to interpret the meaning of a text. According to O'Halloran (2003), Benjamin Lee Whorf and Michael Halliday were among the first linguists to contribute to this field of research. Between the 1930s and 1940s, they developed an approach called

*mystification analysis* intended to systematically decode implicit meaning by identifying specific turns of phrases.

Their approach was inspired by the work of rationalist and empiricist philosophers like Descartes, Leibniz, Locke and Hume, who assumed that language cognition could be explained by a set of replicable syllogisms (O'Halloran, 2003). In fact, Aristotle was most certainly the first philosopher to formulate this assumption with his *law of categories*, as he sought to explain how the predicate of a sentence is determined by a set of attributes.

Many linguists relied on this tradition to understand the process through which the human brain draws inferences, by focusing on the micro-level of discourse. Along with the development of computerised research methods, this prompted the thought that language and discourse could be encoded, decoded and processed thanks to mathematical and computational algorithms.

Today, with the proliferation of data available online, social scientists are searching for computerised research applications able to process a large amount of data in a limited amount of time (Fischer, Lyon et al. 2008; Rasmussen, 2008). As a result, social sciences are likely to evolve towards more quantitative approaches to discourse.

Computerised research applications are now being used in various fields of social sciences to conduct surveys, archive data and run statistical analysis. They may also be applied to interpret large bodies of text by running content or sentiment analysis. Whether these methods are employed in business studies, marketing research or political sciences, they provide a rather quantitative and normative understanding of discourse.

Among others, Grimmer and Stewart (2013) explore how large data sets of texts and documents commonly used in political sciences can now be entirely codified and analysed thanks to *automated text-analysis* programming. These tools can for instance help identify, which political actors are most frequently referred to in a body of texts or with what type of ideological vocabulary those political actors are commonly associated. Grimmer and

Stewart (2013) demonstrate that this alternative to manual coding appears to be more time and cost effective when running quantitative analyses likely to be translated into algorithms. However, such computerised methods are not sufficient to draw inferences on the meaning of a text and still require from the researcher to have an in-depth knowledge of his or her data set:

Automated content analysis methods have demonstrated performance across a variety of substantive problems. These methods will not, however, eliminate the need for careful thought by researchers nor remove the necessity of reading texts. Indeed a deep understanding of the texts is one of the key advantages of the social scientist in applying automated methods. (...) the most productive line of inquiry is to identify the best way to use both humans and automated methods for analyzing texts. (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013: 4)

Consequently, the findings driven by such types of analysis should always be verified through some kind of validation process. In their study, Grimmer and Stewart distinguish between two kinds of automated text-analyses, each presenting different benefits and challenges (ibid). The first one, called the supervised method, requires the researcher to compute a specific research algorithm, thanks to which he or she will be able to assign the text to pre-defined categories. This involves anticipating and including all *function words* that may be meaningful to the search in a specific context. Simultaneously, the researcher also has to prevent all polysemous words, or words that only have a grammatical function, from distorting the result of the computation. Grimmer and Stewart view this technique as more reliable and easier to validate.

The alternative form of automated text analysis is called the dictionary method. In this approach, *dictionary functions* are used to automatically identify the most frequent sequence or text unit of a data set. This kind of computation also enables the researcher to run what is commonly known as *sentiment analysis*, by identifying whether an element is more likely to be referred to in negative or positive terms.

This method (also called *opinion mining*) is documented by Liu (2010), who stresses the fact that such dictionary-based computation can often lead to misleading interpretations of a text. Indeed, a statement may refer to different attributes relating to the word under

computation. In addition, names or attributes may also be designated by a pronoun, which is likely to make the analysis less accurate. Moreover, some statements may be attributed a positive or negative value while hiding an implicit or ironic meaning. Most importantly, as Grimmer and Stewart (2013) emphasise the researcher has less control over such dictionary-based computation and is therefore often unable to perform any validation, depending on the size of the data set:

The consequence of domain specificity and lack of validation is that most analyses based on dictionaries are built on shaky foundations. Yes, dictionaries are able to produce measures that are claimed to be about tone or emotion, but the actual properties of these measures — and how they relate to the concepts they are attempting to measure — are essentially a mystery. Therefore, for scholars to effectively use dictionary methods in their future work, advances in the validation of dictionary methods must be made. (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013: 9)

In light of this, Grimmer and Stewart propose testing *unsupervised dictionary-based* automated text-analyses by manually analysing a sub-sample of the data set. Their work anticipates some of the challenges that social scientists will have to face in the age of Big Data, as computerised methods become increasingly more complex and designed to map considerably large data sets.

Beyond the fields of political sciences or media and communication studies, other researchers began to extract data from participative media to experience virtual ethnography and other tools designed for online research (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2001; Hara, Bonk and Angeli, 2000; McKlin et al. 2002).

In order to compare manual and computerized content analysis (CA), Corich, Kinshuk and Hunt (2006) applied each of these techniques to analyse data extracted from discussion forums designed for e-learning purposes. After comparing the findings of their manual CA with the statistics computed thanks to an *automated content analysis tool*, they conclude that these two sets of results remain significantly different. In fact, the relation between manual and computerised CA just fails to reach the expected coefficient of reliability (80%) suggesting that these two methods are not interchangeable. On the other hand,

Corich, Kinshuk and Hunt (2006) also demonstrate that that the automated text analysis tool used in their study appears to be statistically more reliable than some of the applications used in earlier studies (Garrison et al., 2000). For that reason, their work suggests that computerised research tools are likely to become more accurate in future, which would provide a less-time consuming method for coding.

In response to the increasing complexity of social media, data visualisation tools have introduced a new generation of computerised research methods. These applications are most commonly applied to compute statistics and produce diagrams that map the activity of social media users:

A common step in network analysis is visualization. These diagrams are excellent tools for rapid pattern recognition. (...) However, it is possible to oversell the utility of these diagrams. They are interpretative tools, not unambiguous facts. In many cases the visuals have to be carefully massaged to accentuate the aspect of the graph that the researcher finds noteworthy, which is then reinforced by tabular data. As with the adage, ‘an unexamined life is not worth living’, an uninterpreted sociogram is not worth presenting. (Hogan, 2008: 149)

In addition to the fact that these applications may sometimes be very expensive, they require a considerable amount of time from researchers to master the scripting language or customise the software (Hogan, 2008: 157). Furthermore, the same argument formulated by Grimmer and Stewart (2013) with regards to text analysis applies to the case of data visualisation. Given that the application processes a significantly large data set, it becomes very hard if not impossible for researchers to validate the findings manually.

Overall, computerised research tools, such as those for automated text analysis, sentiment analysis or data visualisation considerably facilitate large-scale quantitative research. They can also be used to map the activity of a network on social media, assess the frequency of a term or test whether a word is referred to positively or negatively. For this reason, computerised research methods are becoming increasingly fashionable and may one day be essential to online ethnography. However, these forms of analysis also prove to be less reliable or meaningful whenever the researcher is unable to fully understand or refine the

algorithm behind the computation. In addition, one needs to have an extremely good knowledge of the data set in order to interpret the patterns or correlations that may be highlighted by such methodological tools.

For this reason, all the computations and data visualisations incorporated in the second empirical chapter of this study are considered as complementary to my discourse and thematic analyses. They are used to corroborate empirical findings that had already been observed qualitatively and contextualised through the process of conducting the entire nexus analysis.

### **5.6. *Nexus of practice: combining virtual and fieldwork ethnography***

In order to conform to Scollon and Scollon's (2004) model of nexus analysis, researchers should be fully immersed in the environment studied. This ethnographic approach is essential in order to understand how discourse is constructed or challenged by the different actors involved in what they call the nexus of practices and to identify how the channel of communication may affect this process. In their work on the Alaskan Native population, Scollon and Scollon (2004) document both face-to-face and online interactions with participants. By doing so, they apply the ethnographic approach to both virtual and naturalistic settings.

Accordingly, my research examines the evolution of the post-revolutionary debate online in relation to the way participants experienced it in the field. Mapping the debate across different blogs and social media between 2012 and 2013 involved following prominent activists on Twitter, identifying different social media campaigns, receiving regular notifications and archiving a considerable amount of sources. This constituted a virtual ethnography, thanks to which I became aware of revolutionaries' vocabulary and identified key actors as well as major political issues commonly referred to by citizens and activists on social media. In this regard the fieldwork ethnography was complementary to the ethnography I had conducted online.

Unlike naturalistic ethnographic settings, virtual ethnography raises challenges with regards to the authenticity of the field (Hine, 2000; Turkle, 1995). Given that the ethnographer is not physically immersed in the environment of study, the identity of participants as well as the information they might share with the researcher remain questionable. Yet on the other hand, provided that the Internet constitutes a particular kind of social environment, the relationships and social practices that take shape in a virtual setting should still be considered as authentic.

Depending on the object of the study, researchers might want to conduct face-to-face interviews in addition to their online ethnography, as a way to verify the authenticity of the field (Hine, 2000). Yet the researcher has to be aware of the fact that those two settings constitute two different ethnographic fields, in which individuals may construct distinctive social realities that may or may not exclude each other. In other words, virtual ethnography should be applied to identify a new range of social practices, rather than as a way to assess whether virtual settings are representative of the offline world:

This leaves us with a paradox: while pursuing face-to-face meetings with online informants might be intended to enhance authenticity via triangulation (Silverman, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), it might also threaten the experiential authenticity that comes from aiming to understand the world the way it is for informants. Rather than accepting face-to-face as inherently better in ethnography, a more skeptical approach suggests that it should be used with caution, and with a sensitivity to the ways informants use it. (Hine, 2000: 49)

Drawing on their ethnographic study of local activist networks and cyberactivism in Barcelona, Postill and Pink (2012) outline the reasons why combining virtual and fieldwork ethnography may however be relevant in the age of digital media:

Hine has suggested that undertaking internet ethnography need not involve the ethnographer travelling physically to a field site (Hine, 2000: 43) when internet ethnography is focused around a certain media event (Hine calls it an 'Internet Event' (2000: 50). However, the issues that internet ethnography engages with can also become particularly relevant in relation to specific localities. Uses of social media can also be interwoven with the qualities, political structures and histories of localities or regions (Postill and Pink, 2012: 1)

On one hand, Postill and Pink acknowledge the contribution of Hine (2000) in postulating the validity of online-based ethnography as a textual practice disconnected from the field. Yet whereas this argument appeared to be particularly relevant in the age of Web 1.0, social media progressively bridged the gap between the offline and the virtual world. Today, social media may in fact be regarded as part of a complex “ethnographic place”, involving both online and offline practices. In that sense, these “ethnographic places” (Pink, 2009) are very similar to what Scollon and Scollon (2004) have conceptualised as a nexus of practices (2004):

Many digital traces of the ethnographer (and ethnographic process) remain part of the internet (e.g., her/his social media engagements and online archiving practices), thus weaving a digital ethnographic place that is inextricable from both the materiality of being online and the offline encounters that are intertwined in its narratives. (Postill and Pink, 2012: 6)

In this new generation of virtual ethnography, Postill and Pink identify a set of practices through which researchers can construct the ethnographic place. As soon as the ethnographer becomes involved in a specific network or field of interest online, he or she comes to follow Twitter users and receive regular email updates or Facebook notifications. Postill and Pink label this type of practice as “catching up” (ibid), as it enables the researcher to remain constantly informed and connected with the population observed.

The ethnographer may also interact with participants via instant messaging, tweets and Facebook likes. Despite the fact that these types of interactions are sometimes asynchronous and considerably different from face-to-face communication, they help in understanding how virtual networks consolidate a social identity.

Finally, Postill and Pink (2012) emphasise the importance of archiving via social media secured profiles or cloud platforms and by creating metadata that will enable the ethnographer to encode and ultimately analyse his or her experience. Overall, they argue that as social media and web applications are becoming a constitutive part of everyday life, virtual ethnography should not only be conducted simultaneously to face-to-face interviews, but may also employ different social platforms relevant to the research:

Social media ethnography, therefore, does not mean doing fieldwork in or about one particular social media platform – such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. While the latter is possible, it is complicated by the fact that most internet users constantly criss-cross a range of platforms through aggregators, search engines, hyperlinks and other devices. Moreover, the movement of the digital ethnographer involves traversing interrelated digital and co-present contexts, for example, sharing a bus ride with activists, a Facebook collaboration or a smartphone image over coffee. These field situations are neither communities nor networks – they are hybrid forms of sociality through which the ethnographer and her research participants gain variously mediated senses of contextual fellowship (Rapport and Amit, 2002). (Postill and Pink, 2012: 11)

This argument proves to be highly relevant when studying digital activism in Tunisia and Egypt, since earlier research has demonstrated that pro-revolutionary activism consisted in a dialogic relationship between online and offline political action. Furthermore, I would argue that in order to approach connectivity from a critical perspective, one should not entirely rely on online research methods. Conducting virtual ethnography across different social media and in addition to a traditional fieldwork helps to contextualise digital activism and encourages critical thinking about its impact on the circulation of discourse.

### **5.7. Analysing the activist blogosphere: data set and method**

Analysing the activist blogosphere allowed me to identify some of the key events and controversies around which the post-revolutionary debate was articulated. This aspect of the research made me accustomed to the ideological *vocabulary* of the revolution. But most importantly, it demonstrated that pro-revolutionary activists had commonly experienced the feeling of losing control over the narratives that surrounded the revolution over the months that followed the 2011 uprisings.

After exploring the activist blogosphere in both countries, I selected six Tunisian and five Egyptian bloggers writing in Arabic, English and French. All bloggers were chosen for having significantly contributed to the revolutionary movement or being considered as prominent figures of the 2011 youth mobilisation. They had created and edited their blogs on a regular basis prior to the 2011 uprisings, which indicated they had been part of the

opposition, before the majority of the middle class and the international community manifested interest in local cyber-activism.

All bloggers had participated to the revolutionary discourse in its early stage, as it was still emerging. Consequently, they were more likely to have experienced what I described earlier as a sense of *intellectual leadership* and were well-placed to witness an evolution in the way political institutions progressively interfered with participative deliberations.

Admittedly, other prominent cyber-activists such as the famous Egyptian software developer Alaa Abdel Fatah, who had been blogging with his partner Manal since 2004, or Egyptian award-winning blogger SandMonkey could have been included in this sample. These activists had however become progressively more active on Twitter, sometimes publishing only very few blog articles after 2013. Nevertheless, it should be noted that other significant bloggers could have been included in this selection and would have been as relevant to this study as the bloggers sampled.

As I will argue in my first empirical chapter, this panel soon appeared to be representative of the multiplicity of voices and diversity of ideological views that composed the pro-revolutionary community. However, I believe that the bloggers considered in my data set have expressed these divergences of opinion in a very subtle way. In spite of the fact that they often expressed very different visions of the revolution and disagreed regarding the strategies of the opposition, they did not always formally state to which ideological approach they belonged.

As is shown in the table below (table 2), the sample included a different proportion of articles for each blog. Given the considerable amount of articles published during the period considered (2011-2014), blog posts were selected provided that they covered specific events or addressed a set of recurrent themes considered as relevant to my research questions.

A first category of writings relates to the 2012 presidential campaign or constitutional referendum. Later articles may also report the controversy that led to the 2013 coup d'état, as opponents to Mohammed Morsi conducted the Tamarud mobilisation<sup>10</sup>. Each of these events were regarded as highly pertinent to this research, since they had punctuated the post-revolutionary crisis in Egypt. In addition, I considered that these events, as narrated by bloggers, would help me set the context in which the data relating to each of my empirical strand had been collected.

Another set of articles was considered as relevant for formulating a critique of traditional mass media as well as a reflection on the relationship between participative and old media. Finally, a third category of blogposts were included for outlining the way political institutions (leading parties, workers' unions, governments and political officials) would portray themselves as they responded to protests or attempted to gain legitimacy in periods of election. I regarded this category as particularly relevant when it came to conceptualise the distinction between discourse and counter-discourse.

Before running the analysis, blogposts were archived via the Zotero Firefox application, which creates live screenshots of a webpage. The application enabled me to store the entire content of a post in its original layout, including readers' comments, hyperlinks and illustrations – while creating metadata for each of the webpages archived. The date of the archive as well as the original web address were automatically stored in my personal secured Zotero account. In addition, this tool allowed me to encode content published in Arabic. Thanks to Zotero, this data set could be stored for free provided that it did not extent to 300MB of data. Alternatively, the application would secure up to 2GB of data for \$20 renewable on a yearly basis.

Out of the ten bloggers considered for this sample, six were publishing under a pseudonym. Bloggers Wael Abbas, Yassin Ayari, Fares Mabrouk and Lina Ben Mhenni

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<sup>10</sup> Tamarud - which means rebellion in Arabic – was the name of the grassroots movement that led the opposition against Mohammed Morsi's government in 2013. It launched a campaign and circulated a petition, which contributed to the success of the June 2013 protests.

made public appearances at conferences, public talks as well as in the media and had become public figures outside from the social media sphere. Political cartoonist \_Z\_ attended public events abroad but kept publishing under a pseudonym.

**Table 2: Blogosphere data set**

Country	Blogger	Number of blog posts considered	Timescale	Language	Format
Egypt	Wael Abbas	3	Jan 2012-June 2012	Arabic	Text/videos
Egypt	Zeinobia	34	Jan 2012-Sept 2013	English	Text/videos
Tunisia	Yassin Ayari	13	Jul -Dec 2011	French	Text
Egypt	Behayya	8	April-Aug 2012	English	Text
Tunisia	Fares Mabrouk	10	Jul 2011-Dec 2013	French	Text
Tunisia	Lina Ben Mhenni	4	April 2011-Nov 2012	French/Arabic	Text
Tunisia	UnderAshes	7	March 2012-May 2013	Arabic	Text
Tunisia	Débat Tunisie	110	Jan 2011-July 2012	French	Text/drawings
Egypt	The Big Pharaoh	41	Feb 2011-Dec 2012	English/Arabic	Text
Egypt	Fustat	8	Jan 2011-Feb 2011	English	Text/videos
Tunisia	Slim Amamou	5	Jul 2010-Aug 2012	Arabic/French	Text/videos

As I argued when completing the institutionalised ethics process required for this research, bloggers had already been concerned with anonymising the data published on their webpages. All the publications posted online were already part of the public domain. In this regard, I was confident that my data set did not involve any additional risk and did not require me to filter traceable information.

Some bloggers formally published a disclaimer and intellectual property statement, suggesting that all references to their work should be formally quoted. Legally as well as from an ethical perspective, I was responsible for referring to those writings as they had been released and labelled by their authors in the public domain. Furthermore, while running the analysis, I did not come across any critical information likely to harm or affect the privacy of any third party.

**Table 3: Description of the Blogosphere Data Sample 1**

<b>Blog</b>	<b>Blogger</b>	<b>Profile</b>	<b>Blogging since</b>	<b>Frequency of publications</b>
<i>Al Wa'l al Masry</i>	Wael Abbas	Egyptian activist and journalist well-known among the revolutionary community for denouncing acts of police brutality on his blog and is considered as one of leading voices of revolutionary cyber-activism in Egypt (still actively blogging in 2015).	Apr-04	One to several blog posts per month (video footages, hyperlinks, document and sources of investigative journalism)
<i>Egyptian chronicles</i>	Zeinobia	Female Egyptian blogger covering political news in English and often quoted by foreign journalists. (Still actively blogging in 2015)	Aug-04	Writes an average of 60 blog articles per month between August 2004 and December 2013.
<i>Malhit</i>	Yassin Ayari	Tunisian blogger and activist involved in the opposition against former Egyptian president Ben Ali. Yassin Ayari has been condemned and incarcerated in November 2014 after denouncing acts of corruption within the military administration. (Still actively blogging in 2015)	Jul-10	Writes an average of 3.1 blog articles per month between July 2010 and December 2013.
<i>Behayya</i>	Behayya	Egyptian blogger writing under a female pseudonym. Behayya has been covering the different stages of the political transition after 2011 and provides considerable amount of information on the 2012 presidential campaign. (Still actively blogging)	Mar-05	Writes an average of 1.9-blog articles per month between March 2005 and December 2013.
<i>Fares Mabrouk Blog</i>	Fares Mabrouk	Young entrepreneur and former attaché in the Ministry of Energy and Industry in Tunisia. He studied in USA and advocates digital technologies as a way to stimulate local economy. (Still actively writing)	May-08	Writes an average of 0.6-blog articles per month between May 2008 and December 2013.

Among the 237 blog posts collected, some incorporated pictures, video footages (Wael Abbas and Zeinobia) and illustrations (\_Z\_). With the exception of Tunisian satirical cartoonist \_Z\_, bloggers used visual media as a way to corroborate or illustrate their statements. Photos and video footages were then used as evidence or as supportive documents in any article written with an editorial tone or developing some form of investigative journalism.

Pictures or footage would, for example, feature a TV campaign, which the writer regarded as particularly representative of the military propaganda in Egypt. Other videos filmed by the activists themselves, such as the ones published by bloggers Wael Abbas or Yassin Ayari, would directly evidence acts of police brutality or corruption. In my data set, only four publications consisted of video footage with no supportive text. In this cases, however, the images were very factual and self-sufficient in outlining the object of the post.

**Table 4: Description of the Blogosphere Data Sample 2**

Blog	Blogger	Profile	Blogging since	Frequency of publications
<i>A Tunisian Girl</i>	Lina Ben Mhenni	Famous Tunisian female blogger, activist and assistant lecturer in linguistics at Tunis University. The Blogger is nominated to the Nobel Peace Prize for her engagement in the Tunisian revolution (Still actively blogging in 2015)	Jun-09	Writes an average of 14 blog articles per month between June 2009 and December 2013.
<i>UnderAshes</i>	UnderAshes	Tunisian blogger member of the association Tunis al Fata and the movement of young Tunisians. (Still actively blogging in 2015)	Dec-07	Writes an average of 1.67 blog articles per month between December 2007 and December 2013.
<i>Débat Tunisie</i>	<u>Z_</u>	Tunisian caricaturist illustrating the news by posting series of satirical and controversial drawings or short comments. Publishes his work (online and print publications) under a pseudonym. (Still actively writing and drawing in 2015)	Aug-07	One to ten blog post per month on average (drawing and comments)
<i>The Big Pharaoh</i>	The Big Pharaoh	Egyptian blogger covering political news, revolutionary protests and clashes with the police or the Christian minority; comments political news from the perspective of Cairo's distinctive districts. (Still actively blogging in 2015).	Apr-04	Writes an average of 12.3 blog articles per month between April 2004 and December 2013.
<i>Fustat</i>	Ibn ad Dunya	Egyptian blogger providing alternative news coverage, outlining propagandist statements and denouncing abuse of power from the military regime; covers local news in English for international audience (last blog posts in 2013).	May-05	One to ten blog posts per months
<i>NoMemorySpace</i>	Slim Amamou	Tunisian blogger and former Secretary of State for Sport and Youth (under 2011 transitional government)	Jul-10	Writes an average of 0.19 blog post per month between 2011 and 2012

Unlike other bloggers, Tunisian cartoonist Z\_ primarily expressed himself visually. Although his texts further elaborated on the meaning of his illustrations, the substance of his statements resided essentially in his drawings. The 107 publications sampled from his blog would therefore require combining semiotic with discursive analysis.

### 5.8. Applying data visualisation tools to map the 2012 presidential campaign (Egypt)

As witnessed by bloggers and revolutionary activists, the post-revolutionary debate soon became codified in the context of the first presidential election in Egypt (2012). Political leaders and parties willing to gain or *regain* their legitimacy stepped into the political scene, labelling the debate with their names and slogans. Different narratives of the revolution were progressively marketed in order to promote competing political agendas. This became particularly visible online as these labels were likely to induce a trend in terms of tweets or search keywords.

Whereas most of the studies conducted at the time of the uprisings had portrayed the Internet as a tool for the pro-revolutionary youth, it was now crucial to assess the presence of traditional political actors on social media. Along with the election of a new parliament in 2011– which was dissolved in June 2012 – the 2012 presidential race arose as social media began to be regarded as a potentially strong political tool. The campaign occurred in a period of increasing social media usage and as people recovered an interest in politics. It was therefore very likely to have raised the interest of parties and political leaders in social media. Presidential candidates in particular were potentially keen to campaign online, especially when targeting the middle class and pro-revolutionary opposition.

In the context of the 2012 presidential election, my third empirical strand was designed to determine to what extent those political leaders had become more active and visible online. This approach aimed at responding to my first research question in evaluating whether social media had become a tool for more institutional forms of politics.

Two different data visualisation tools were used to assess the visibility of the five candidates leading the first round of the 2012 presidential race. The first application, called R-Shief, was used to assess the visibility of the five candidates on Twitter during the first round of the election.

R-Shief<sup>11</sup> is an open source project founded by Laila Shereen Sakr in 2009 and designed to offer various data visualisation applications for researchers working on social media and global media activism. It initiated a range of studies conducted in the field of politics and media studies in collaboration with the American University in Cairo and is currently developing new data visualisation tools, which will be applicable across various social media platforms.

This media lab provides access to a considerably large database of tweets published in Arabic and in English between 2008 and 2013. It also offers various data visualisation and

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<sup>11</sup> <http://r-shief.org/>

sentiment analysis applications thanks to which researchers can evaluate the volume and popularity of a tweet over a specific period of time.

By examining the volume of tweets mentioning the names of the leading presidential candidates over the first round of the campaign, this tool allowed me to identify which of the presidential candidates were more visible on Twitter. Simultaneously, I collected all tweets posted from candidates' official Twitter accounts during this period in order to determine which candidates had been the most active on Twitter.

On the basis of the presidential candidates and their distinctive programme, this allowed me to determine which political agendas were more represented online and which political elites had invested in this new form of campaigning. Most importantly, this approach confirmed that some of the leading political actors, who were barely active online prior to the revolution, were now increasingly visible on social media.

The analysis conducted on my Twitter data set corroborated the findings of a study I had conducted for an ESRC research project and in which I investigated how Egyptian Google users sought information during the presidential campaign (<https://voterecology.wordpress.com/>). The Voter Ecology project investigated voters' use of search engines in election periods and across four different countries: the United States and the United Kingdom, Italy and post-revolutionary Egypt. This cross-country study aimed at determining whether Google users' search interests reflected the traditional mass media coverage at the time of a campaign by identifying unexpected search terms, which had not been inspired by mass media narratives. The methodology applied for this research relied on the data visualisation application Google Trends. This freely available tool enables any user to visualise variations of search volume for a specific term and to compare up to five different Google search terms over a specific period of time from 2004 onwards.

This method allows the extrapolation of the evolution of Google users' interest in a particular search term during the course of a campaign. Search trends can be filtered to

target one specific location. Google Trends generates graphs that represent variations in the search volume of the chosen keyword or set of keywords over time. Thus it does not provide raw search data, but computes instead a search popularity index from 0 to 100, where 100 represents the highest number of searches in the series and all other values are calculated in relation to that value. In addition, Google Trends also provides a list of additional search terms that are most frequently associated by users with those in question. The scale of search volume depends on the set of search terms compared in the same graph and the exact amount of searches remains private to Google.

As I investigated the Egyptian case for the purposes of this research, I came to compare the popularity of the candidates' names in terms of Google searches over the first round of the presidential campaign. This further illustrated the findings of my R-Shief computation, suggesting that the most visible and popular candidates on Twitter were also the ones for whom Egyptian citizens searched for information online. And as mentioned above, this evidenced the fact that the internet and social media were no longer used exclusively by the pro-revolutionary opposition.

These findings had to be analysed in relation to the way traditional mass media reported the campaign. For this, I applied a similar computation to quantify the amount of occurrences that could be found for the names of the five leading candidates on the NexisLexis news database. The NexisLexis news database provided me with access to a selection of 37 Egyptian general news sources likely to have reported the campaign between the 1<sup>st</sup> March and 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2012 (cf. Appendix). Within this sample of the Egyptian press, four newspapers proved to have recurrently mentioned the names of the five candidates in reporting the first round of the presidential race: Al Messa (Arabic), Al-Ahram, Al-Ahram Gate (Arabic) and Al Gomhurriah (Arabic).

**Table 5: Sample of Egyptian newspapers extracted from the NexisLexis database**

<b>News sources extracted from the NexisLexis database and mentioning the names of the five leading candidates during the first round of the 2012 presidential campaign</b>		
<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>Content-Summary</u>	<u>Frequency/Update-Schedule</u>
Al Messa (Arabic)	Evening newspaper covering politics, society and sport.	Irregular/Updated regularly - Atypical update schedule
Al-Ahram	Most widely circulated Arabic language daily newspaper in Egypt, published by Al-Ahram Publishing. Al-Ahram covers Egyptian politics, international news, economy, sports, crime, culture, science and environment.	Daily; Monday – Sunday/Updated regularly - Atypical update schedule
Al-Ahram Gate (Arabic)	News portal from Al-Ahram Publishing, which covers Egyptian politics, International news, business, opinion, arts & culture, sports, lifestyle, fashion.	Daily; Monday - Sunday/Updated regularly - Atypical update schedule
Al Gomhurriah (Arabic)	Newspaper covering news, politics, business, sports, entertainment, culture and society.	Irregular/Updated regularly - Atypical update schedule

Together, the searches computed on R-Shief, Google Trends and the Nexis Lexis database provided me with an overview of the most mediatized candidates and political groups in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. Furthermore, this led me to identify which political actors may have been more visible on the internet and social media than in the national press.

Finally, in order to assess candidates' visibility and campaigning strategy in relation with their respective political programme, I collected all tweets produced by the two candidates who appeared to be the most active on Twitter. All the tweets considered in this additional data set were produced over the first round of the presidential race and archived in my Zotero Firefox secured account. I then proceeded to a thematic and discourse analysis of the tweets in order to identify which aspects of the campaign had been emphasised by these two political actors. This rather alternative approach not only allowed me to understand candidates' Twitter campaigning strategy in a more qualitative way. Most importantly, however, it demonstrated that the Internet and social media were now serving the interests of the counter-revolution as well as to consolidate the revolutionary opposition.

Overall, this empirical strand led me to reflect on how the revolution, as much as the presidential campaign, had been semantically encoded via applications such as Twitter or Google. This had inevitably contributed to make the revolutionary vocabulary fluid and superficial. The same words that had driven the revolutionary movement were now serving different political agendas, which could potentially explain the failure of pro-revolutionaries in the 2012 presidential race.

### **5.9. Analysing the 2012 constitutional debate (Egypt): the Dostour Sharek e-consultation platform**

The Dostour Sharek website was designed by an external software engineering company for the interim government. This social platform aimed at providing an interactive environment for citizens to comment on and rate the drafts of the new constitution developed by the Constituent Assembly before the referendum of 2012. In December 2012, designers released the statistics of the project, which indicated that 653,718 contributions from 68,130 participants had been made to the draft of the constitution, among which 12% were in comments and the other 88% were ratings ("likes"/"dislikes").

According to this statistical report, the large majority of rates assigned by users were “likes” (89%). The most commented and ranked articles addressed the themes of *public authority* and *rights and freedom* and the amount of contributions raised between September and November 2012. Most participants were located in the largest Egyptian cities, such as Cairo, Giza, Tanta, Port Said, Alexandria, Mansoura and Suez. Outside Egypt, more than 5,500 participants originated from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Emirates. 1,313 visitors were located in the United States. Only 14% of participants were females aged on average 24 to 44. The majority of male participants were aged 24 to 34.

The most contested article in terms of comments and dislikes was article 2, which had been reviewed and further explained in a reviewed version of the article produced by the Constituent Assembly.

**Table 6: Statistics released on the *Dostour Sharek* website after the 2012 referendum**

<b>Dostour Sharek Statistics</b>	
Total amount of contributions	653,718
Comments on constitution articles	75,626
likes/dislikes	578,092
Total amount of participants	68,130
Final draft downloads	6,336,947
Number of participants on final draft	35,697
Contributions on final draft	279,060
Source: <a href="http://www.dostour.eg/sharek">www.dostour.eg/sharek</a> ; Contributions Statistics on 2012 Constitutional Article	

The data set analysed in my third empirical chapter was collected from the archives of the independent web design company in charge of creating and administering the Dostour Sharek e-consultation platform, for the 2012 Constitutional referendum. Out of the 320 articles originally drafted by the constituent assembly, designers gave me access to the archives of the posts and comments relating to the first 30 articles of the draft. This considerable amount of data was manually recorded via the Zotero Firefox application.

Whereas the application presented substantial advantages when organising the data set, collecting the data manually proved to be a very time consuming process. Indeed, when applying Zotero, users have to scroll down to the bottom of a webpage, while opening

every window that might exceed a certain amount of words by post in order to record the entire content. Consequently, archiving a social media page containing several thousands of comments requires a lot of time for users to make this information visible as well as for the software to process and record it.

This tool however enabled me to file different samples of comments for each of the 29 articles analysed, varying from 10 to 109 posts, which represented on average 63% of the comments published for each of these articles. In total 1,317 comments were analysed and classified into different categories for each article, depending on the topic addressed and the argument formulated by users.

The approach applied in this empirical chapter draws on a set of studies conducted in the field of *e-governance* and *e-democracy*, which were designed to analyse similar e-consultation projects (Chatfiel and Alhujran, 2009; Saebo, Rose and Molka-Danielsen, 2010; Glassey and Leresche, 2012). Whereas the statistics issued by the Dostour Sharek platform only assessed participants' approval by computing the number of "likes" and "dislikes" for each article, my content analysis categorises participants' comments. Independently from the number of "likes" and "dislikes" posted, I distinguished the comments that formally contested the content of the draft from those that explicitly approved the article. In addition, I considered a third category, which included all the posts in which participants discussed the content of the draft in a critical way, by justifying their views or questioning certain aspects of the articles (cf. Appendices).

My content analysis identifies recurrent comments and assessed to what extent users would reach a consensus when reviewing the constitutional draft. By doing so, it enabled me to highlight major differences in the way citizens interpreted the concepts formulated during the revolution as they would materialise in constitutional law. Most importantly, it led me to discuss the question of sustainability from a particular angle.

Indeed, by focusing on how social media had been used to generate direct interactions between citizens and government officials, I came to reflect on the third quarter of the

discursive cycle: the stage during which the revolutionary discourse is likely to become institutionalised. This part of my research proved to be essential when it came to determine the reasons why the revolutionary counter-discourse was not sustainable. As I will show, it demonstrated that the ideological vocabulary of the revolution had remained fluid in the context of the 2012 constitutional debate.

**Table 7: Description of the data set extracted from the Dostour Sharek e-consultation platform (2012)**

Article	Number of comments considered	Comments posted between (timescale)	Additional comments posted in 2013 [number of comments]	Total number of comments posted**	Date of administrator's latest update	Proportion of comments sampled ***
1	109	Dec-12	March 2013 [3]	246	22/12/12*	44%
2	57	Dec-12	Jan -Aug 2013 [6]	15769	24/09/12	0.4%
3	48	Dec-12	Jan -Sept 2013 [3]	103	22/12/12*	47%
4	76	Dec-12	Jul 2013 [2]	119	01/09/12	64%
5	56	Dec-12	/	83	22/12/12*	67%
6	87	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	March 2013 [1]	92	22/12/12*	95%
7	58	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	65	22/12/12*	89%
8	39	Dec-12	Jul 2013 [1]	96	22/12/12*	41%
9	36	Dec-12	Jul 2013 [1]	69	22/12/12*	52%
10	69	Dec-12	/	130	29/11/12	53%
11	45	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	48	29/11/12	94%
12	27	Dec-12	/	145	29/11/12	19%
14	19	Dec-12	Sept 2013 [2]	115	01/12/12	17%
15	10	Dec-12	/	48	29/11/12	21%
16	48	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	52	29/11/12	92%
17	38	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	38	29/11/12	100%
18	41	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	77	29/11/12	53%
19	38	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	44	29/11/12	86%
20	20	Dec-12	/	46	29/11/12	43%
21	27	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	31	29/11/12	87%
22	44	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	51	29/11/12	86%
23	26	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	29	29/11/12	90%
24	35	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	Dec 2013 [3]	41	29/11/12	85%
25	17	Dec-12	/	31	29/11/12	55%
26	34	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	Sept 2013 [1]	37	29/11/12	92%
27	53	Dec-12	/	76	29/11/12	70%
28	23	Nov 2012-Dec 2012	/	28	29/11/12	82%
29	29	Dec-12	/	234	24/09/12	12%
30	108	Sept-Dec 2012	/	125	22/12/12*	86%

*\*The date stated is the date of the 2012 referendum and is indicative of the fact that the article was among the most recently updated articles of the constitutional draft, according to the Dostour Sharek platform (the exact date of the update is unknown)*

*\*\*Total number of comments posted for the latest version of the draft (according to Dostour platform)*

*\*\*\* Proportion of comments sampled among all comments posted for the article*

Given the fact that each of the draft articles considered generated a different amount of comments, the proportion of the comments sampled varies depending on the article. Among the 29 sets of comments collected, the 57 posts extracted from article number 2 of the draft only constituted 0.4% of users' inputs. However, article 2 had proved to be the most controversial as well as the most discussed article, generating a total of 15,769 comments according to Dostour Sharek's statistics.

**Table 8: Inventory of comments sampled for each constitutional article**

Article	Number of comments in favour of the article	Number of comments contesting the article	Number of comments suggesting improvements	Proportion of comments in favour of the article	Proportion of comments contesting the article	Proportion of comments suggesting improvements
1	59	11	27	54%	10%	25%
2	24	7	19	42%	12%	33%
3	15	10	15	31%	21%	31%
4	11	39	24	14%	51%	32%
5	15	12	23	27%	21%	41%
6	36	7	34	41%	8%	39%
7	29	7	23	51%	12%	40%
8	11	6	18	28%	15%	46%
9	14	7	7	39%	19%	19%
10	13	25	25	19%	36%	36%
11	19	10	9	42%	22%	20%
12	8	8	10	30%	30%	37%
14	3	9	8	16%	47%	42%
15	3	1	3	40%	10%	30%
16	15	12	11	31%	25%	23%
17	22	2	16	58%	5%	42%
18	9	13	14	22%	32%	34%
19	18	3	16	47%	8%	42%
20	8	2	10	40%	10%	50%
21	13	2	9	48%	7%	33%
22	15	12	16	34%	27%	36%
23	13	2	8	50%	8%	31%
24	9	10	15	26%	29%	43%
25	5	6	6	29%	35%	35%
26	16	4	9	47%	12%	26%
27	24	9	18	45%	17%	34%
28	14	2	5	61%	9%	22%
29	6	16	6	21%	55%	21%
30	27	8	61	25%	7%	56%

In order to have access to the entire set of comments posted at the time of the constitutional debate, the data were collected after the 2012 referendum. The data sample was retrieved and archived between September and October 2013, as the web design company in charge of editing the Dostour Sharek platform was launching a new version of the project to cover the January 2014 referendum.

The company in question provided me with access to all the comments posted on the 2012 version of the constitutional draft, which were no longer public and could not be accessed via the official Dostour Sharek webpage. The web designers in charge of the project were therefore informed of my study and kindly allowed me to use their own archives to run my analysis.

**Table 9: Interview with members of the Dostour Sharek e-consultation project**

**Draft of the questionnaires used as a guide to the qualitative interview (submitted to the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences' Ethics committee in September 2014)**

1. *Did the 2012 constituent assembly have specific expectations regarding the design of the Dostour Sharek platform?*
2. *How did you start developing user interface?*
3. *How were users' comments aggregated and presented to the constituent assembly?*
4. *How many updates were uploaded to the constitutional draft when the 2012 Dostour Sharek platform was active?*
5. *How were the "top three comments" selected for each constitutional article selected?*
6. *What was the average number of Unique Visitors for each constitutional article posted?*
7. *Did some constitutional articles reach a substantially higher amount of Unique Visitors as others?*
8. *Which article generated the highest amount of visits?*
9. *Which article generated the highest amount of contributions?*
10. *Did you consider enabling users to respond to each other's comments when designing the platform?*
11. *How did you notify people, when the draft of a constitutional article had been updated?*
12. *Did many users revisit the pages of the constitutional articles that had been reviewed and updated on the Dostour Sharek website.*

### **5.10. Face to face interviews with key actors involved in the Dostour Sharek project**

Approaching the designers also allowed me to obtain additional information on the process through which the e-consultation project had been initiated and administered. Apart from the statistics delivered by the website and the name of the web designing company, no additional information could be found on the implementation of the project. Yet, for the purpose of this research, it was crucial to identify which and whose political interests lay behind this initiative. Not only would this enable me to set the context in which this particular form of online deliberation took place, but it would also help me to understand whether it had contributed to the *institutionalisation* of the revolution.

For the same reason, I was also very keen to find out how and according to which regulations the architecture of the social platform had been designed. This was essential for me to determine which aspects of the debate were induced by its technological format and what was specific to contributors' input. For this purpose, I conducted a face-to-face interview with two stakeholders involved in the implementation of the 2012 Dostour Sharek project during the course of my fieldwork.

One interview was originally scheduled with a member of the web designing company commissioned by the Constituent Assembly to develop the platform. Prior to this interview, this participant (Nouredin) spontaneously contacted me and proposed to introduce me to one of the government officers (Said) who had collaborated on the implementation of the project within the Constituent Assembly. The first part of the interview was then conducted with my original participant. The second participant, Said, was interviewed afterwards and was asked further questions on the position of the Constituent Assembly regarding the project and the way the former government had conducted the campaign in favour of the referendum.

This qualitative interview involved a different questionnaire to the one applied for the ethnography and was specifically intended to outline the conditions in which the project had been initiated. However, as I will argue in my fourth empirical chapter, although this

questionnaire was designed to contextualise the 2012 constitutional debate, participants' experience appeared to be highly relevant to the entire ethnography. For this reason, Said's and Nouredin's statements are referred to in my third as much as in my fourth empirical chapter.

### **5.11. Fieldwork ethnography: recruiting participants and facing the ethical challenges**

The fieldwork took place between September and November 2014 in affiliation with the American University in Cairo. Twenty participants were interviewed for this study, among which eighteen were recruited through a snowballing method. The first participants were introduced to me thanks to a network of fellow researchers, who had already been conducting studies on the field. Out of the nineteen meetings conducted for this ethnography, only sixteen led to formal interview recorded and reported in the interviews transcripts. Five additional appointments were conducted as informal conversations and documented as such.

The sample of participants recruited included highly-educated middle class citizens between 20 to 50 years old. Among the twenty informants I interacted with, seven were left wing pro-revolutionary activists involved in opposition movements or working for human rights advocacy NGOs. Five of these seven activists were still applying social media on a regular basis to promote their political activities. Five other participants were journalists or editorial writers working or occasionally writing for private news outlets and three others were members of officially recognised post-revolutionary parties, involved in more institutional forms of politics. Three additional interviewees were not directly involved in the political debate and did not claim to belong to a specific political camp. These three participants can be characterised as regular social media users, commonly applying digital devices for personal and social purposes.

As I will argue when addressing ethical considerations, it can be acknowledged that this sample is not fully representative of the heavily polarised political environment in Egypt.

Overall, the most politically engaged participants belonged to the left-wing opposition. Only two interviewees introduced themselves to me as liberals and no member of the traditionalist parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi movements was recruited. This was partly due to the fact that the Islamist opposition suffered from a high level of repression over the months that followed the 2013 coup and proved to be, therefore, hardly willing to participate to this research. In addition, the snowballing method also contributed to recruit participants with similar ideological views. As a result, it should be said that the findings of this ethnography might have been partially biased by the lack of representativeness of my sample. Nevertheless, it could be argued that left-wing pro-revolutionaries were more likely to formulate a critical reflection on the outcome of the revolution, given that, unlike traditionalists and pro-militaries, most of them did not belong to a long-established political institution.

**Table 10: Interviews conducted as part of the fieldwork ethnography****Draft of the questionnaires used as a guide to the qualitative interview (submitted to the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences Ethics committee in September 2014)**

1. *In your opinion, who started using social media as well as other participative tools to discuss about politics in Egypt?*
2. *In your opinion, what was the characteristic of this early form of social media use?*
3. *In what way was this early form of social media use different from the way mainstream media and political institutions covered politics before the 2011 uprisings?*
4. *How do you think the application of social media and other participative media evolved over the months that followed the 2011 uprisings?*
5. *How might the category or diversity of political actors involved in the participative debate have changed between 2011 and 2013 (online as well as offline)?*
6. *How do you think that the debate and the dominant political arguments may have evolved between 2011 and 2013 (online as well as offline)?*
7. *In your opinion, how and when did official political institutions became active online and in the broader debate that was initiated by the revolution?*
8. *Do you think that the arguments and tools used for revolutionary discourse have also been employed to promote the discourse of the counter-revolution and if so, in what ways?*
9. *What did activists and grass-roots movements learn from the experience of using social media (or network activism) in Egypt?*
10. *Is there a clear relationship between reliance on social media activism by movements, and the control they have over their political message?*
11. *Which political actors involved in the debate between 2011 and 2013 do you think benefitted most and least from social media activism over the short and the longer terms?*
12. *From your perspective on the revolutionary process, what overall were the biggest advantages and disadvantages of the use of social media activism in Egypt?*
13. *What alternative forms of political engagement might have been more productive than social media activism?*

A set of informal conversations was conducted over the first week of the fieldwork in order to build trust and introduce myself to participants. This was also intended to experience how participants from different political perspectives might react to the questionnaire and identify any questions that might be received as too controversial. By the end of the first week, the draft of the questionnaire was slightly refined and the final version was sent to the ethics committee before being approved by my supervisor.

The ethnography generated considerable ethical concerns, given the instability of the political context in Egypt. Some participants known as opponents of the military regime were facing risks of being investigated by the authorities. Over the months that preceded the fieldwork, the new military elite had proved to be extremely repressive with any member of the activist community considered as likely to affect the image of the new military regime *vis-à-vis* international public opinion. Since 2012, the government had released television advertisements warning citizens not to divulge information to foreigners<sup>12</sup>, portraying them as potential spies and enemies of the state.

The environment required handling all the data collected with particular care in order to preserve the anonymity of informants, as both participants and myself could have been identified or tracked. Despite the ethics approval procedure I had to go through prior to the fieldwork, I was not able to fully forecast the measures that could be taken to prevent those risks.

My academic advisor at the American University in Cairo (AUC) suggested during our first meeting that participants themselves would be better suited to assess potential risks and know how to prevent them. I would then have to refer to their experiences of and follow their recommendations on how to create the safest environment for the interviews. Although I came to the same conclusion after conducting this ethnography, I became concerned that this approach would inevitably affect my ethical responsibility.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/12/beware-foreign-spies-egypt-warns-ads>

**Table 11: Sample of Participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Profile</b>
Mukhtar	40-something Marxist involved a post-revolutionary left wing party. Social media activist, who occasionally writes editorials for the press.
Muna	Employee of a private media group, working for a prominent TV channel
Yasmeen	Social media activist, who contributed to several campaigns and mobilisations and engaged in a human rights advocacy organisation.
Nadim	(Christian) Activist and editorial writer with an extended network among the left wing activist community.
Nouredin	Software designer and entrepreneur involved in the Dostour Sharek project.
Said	Civil Servant who contributed to communicate the 2012 constitutional draft and promote citizens' participation to the 2012 referendum
Farid	Human right advocate involved in several humanitarian projects and actively using social media to promote his activity.
Zakaria	Member of one of the post-revolutionary civil parties.
Mehdi	Young revolutionary activist affiliated to one of the post-revolutionary civil party and involved in several students' mobilisations.
Tariq	(Christian) Representative of the young middle class not affiliated to any specific political movement but sympathiser of the revolution.
Amir	Middle class liberal political scientist occasionally writing for foreign press and independent news outlets.
Samira	Middle class liberal secularist writing for foreign press and independent news outlets.
Khalil	Journalist in charge of developing the online edition of a private Egyptian newspaper.
Elias	Marxist and left wing activist involved in the 2011 uprisings.
Samy	40-something member of the middle class not involved in politics.
Nabil	30-Something parliamentary candidate involved in politics over the two years that preceded the fieldwork.
Informal conversation 1	Press and communication officer of a foreign embassy with an extended network among the bloggers and activists
Informal conversation 2	50-something member of a post-revolutionary Civil party. Left-wing secularist.
Informal conversation 3	Lower middle class member of the 2011 revolutionary mobilisation and founder of an emerging party.
Informal conversation 4	Communication officer of a human right advocacy NGO

Prior to the fieldwork, I had been informally advised by a fellow researcher who had been conducting interviews and living in Cairo for the past three years. The researcher in question emphasised the challenges caused by the political repression, stating that foreign researchers were now commonly considered as a threat, due to the conspiracy theory initiated by the state. Given the circumstances, she advised me to collect informed consent orally and avoid using any written documents attesting to my research activities. For example, this involved delivering the content of the Plain language statement orally. Such advice led me to think that the common ethical procedure was inappropriate, in case of a conflict of interest between participants and local authorities.

In accordance with what was suggested by my AUC advisors, fellow researchers and participants themselves, fourteen out the twenty interviews and informal conversations were set in coffee shops located in middle class areas. Three of them took place in interviewees' private homes and three others were conducted in their work places. As required by the ethics committee regulations, I informed all participants of my institutional affiliations, commented on the purpose of my research and discussed any potential risks with them. Interviewees were also informed that their identity would never be disclosed. All participants interviewed provided oral informed consent.

Surprisingly, some of them asked me for further information about the reasons for such ethical measures, sometimes questioning the need for anonymising the data. Some interviewees who were well known among the activist community for publically expressing their political views on social media and the independent press claimed that they would not mind being identified in my research. I informed them that my commitment with the ethical committees of the academic institutions hosting the study required me to remove names or personal information relating to all participants.

As stated in the form submitted for ethical approval prior to the fieldwork, the ethnography also involved limiting any electronic interactions with participants that might be tracked online. Indeed, as the research aimed at developing a critical perspective on social media activism, I argued that my critical approach should be applied precisely when designing

the research in order to preserve participants' anonymity. For this reason, I intended to contact participants via text messaging and private or professional email channels, avoiding public social media platforms and Gmail applications likely to be monitored by security agencies.

Yet despite the information provided in the Plain Language Statement, participants spontaneously sent me Facebook friend invitations or tagged me in Facebook posts. In spite of the fact that many of them admitted to being aware of the risk of being monitored online, they argued that social media remained one of their main channels of communication. As they kept using it to disseminate their views and cover their political activities, they considered it as a way to provide me with an insight into their experiences of the technology.

Ironically, then, the publicity versus the confidentiality of my involvement in the field was beyond my control as a result of the sociological phenomenon that I intended to investigate. Informants discussed their participation in this research with other members of the activist community, with reference to my name. As I recruited new participants, three weeks after the beginning of the fieldwork, I was surprised to learn that they had already heard about me from some of the interviewees I had already met.

Once again, this was due to the rapidity with which information spreads among the activist Egyptian middle class, which partly constituted the object of my study. But most importantly, it highlighted the fact that the ethics procedure was less applicable in a context in which gaining public recognition was considered as more valuable and empowering than preserving one's privacy. Indeed, many militants had put their personal lives at risk purposefully to pursue revolutionary action and would often see private and social interests as conflicting.

This also made me aware that some of the interviewees felt very much invested in the process of being interviewed. While I was concerned about my ethical responsibility as a researcher, many participants demonstrated their political engagement through the way they shared their experiences of the revolution. They appeared to be very conscious of the fact that their testimony would shape my perception of the field. In that respect, interviews were often approached as a continuation of their everyday political engagement.

Whereas the ethics procedure had specifically trained me to think in terms of my ethical obligation *vis-à-vis* my participants, interviewees saw themselves as partly responsible for the contribution that this research was likely to bring to the literature on the revolution. Overall, my ability to ensure that all formal ethical measures would be applied was considerably limited. As they did not dissociate their participation in this study from their political activism, some participants were ready to face the same risks that they already faced in their everyday lives in order to communicate their political message. I had to rely on their experience of the field to anticipate any security issues and determine whether the environment in which interviews were conducted would be appropriate.

However relevant the formal ethical procedure was from the perspective of the University's legal obligations and institutional framework, it initially led me to overestimate my leeway and assigned me with a level of control that I did not have in practice. The reality of the field was that, however cautious and solicitous I was in ensuring safety and privacy for interviewees and for myself, I was entirely dependent on my interviewees to anticipate the risks and decide whether those risks should be taken.

#### **5.12. Limitations of the research**

The first limitation of this research lies in the fact that the online ethnography could not be conducted in Tunisia. Recruiting potential participants online and from abroad appeared to be considerably challenging. However, from a methodological perspective, this demonstrated that a virtual ethnography, when it is not supported by fieldwork, is not always appropriate to building trust with participants. This is also the case when social

media constitutes the environment in which the population observed was originally formed.

To some extent, the challenges I had to face when recruiting participants virtually in Tunisia could also be interpreted as a sign of the evolution of digital activism into a mainstream communication channel. Indeed, when analysing the blogosphere, as well as during the fieldwork conducted in Egypt, cyber-activists expressed the fact that blogs and social media could no longer be exclusively regarded as *the* media of the opposition. Since the uprisings, they had become aware that social media were now monitored or infiltrated by private agents from different political groups (*Legan electrony*<sup>13</sup>). As the cyberspace was becoming more representative of the political debate occurring offline in all its diversity, members of the opposition would inevitably become as mistrustful online as they had to be in real life. In this respect, I suggest that the difficulties I came across when conducting my virtual ethnography in Tunisia are also revealing of what I will describe as the *alienation of the revolution*. This however, is only a supposition, which should be tested by verifying whether a similar virtual ethnography would have been more successful over the years that preceded the revolution.

### 5.13. Conclusion to methodology

Each of the four empirical strands that compose this data set enabled me to witness the alienation of the revolution from a different angle. Together, they allowed me to articulate the evolution of the narratives that surrounded the revolution chronologically, from the first presidential election to the constitutional referendum that unleashed the 2013 military coup in Egypt.

Applying data visualisation significantly enhanced my knowledge of the vocabulary (semantics) through which the post-revolutionary debate had been encoded online. In order to identify some of the key words and hashtags through which the 2012 presidential debate

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<sup>13</sup> “Legan electrony” is the term used by Egyptians to designate agents hired by different political groups to influence public debate by spreading rumours and controversies on social media

had been codified, I had to further investigate which aspects of the campaign had potentially affected public opinion.

The main limitation of this approach lies in the fact that, while being virtually immersed in the presidential or constitutional debate, I was unable to relate this to my own socio-political environment. This was precisely what my fieldwork ethnography intended to rectify. Yet from a methodological perspective, this argument may contribute to the debate on the validity of virtual ethnography. As many have already argued (Hine, 2000; Postill and Pink, 2012), online ethnography is undeniably relevant, when researchers intend to understand a social reality that is exclusively constructed in a virtual space. However, this may not be sufficient when the socio-political factors studied operate in an environment which is different from that of the researcher (O'Connor et al. 2008: 280-281).

With this in mind, my fieldwork allowed me to confront my perception of the field, as it had been framed by my virtual ethnography. Informally interacting with Egyptians, witnessing the physical presence of the army, being surrounded by displays of pro-revolutionary art gave me access to broader range of mediums through which both discourse and counter-discourse had been mediatized.

## 6. First empirical analysis: across the activist blogosphere

In this chapter, I will set out the results of the CDA I conducted on a sample of blog posts collected from the Tunisian and Egyptian activist blogospheres between 2011 and 2013. Although this analysis centres on the pro-revolutionary opposition, it remains critical in that it contributes to identify how different instances of discourse were competing for leadership over the months that followed the 2011 uprisings.

On the one hand, this chapter analyses how leading political institutions attempted at regaining legitimacy on the political scene, as this was reported by bloggers within the opposition. On the other hand, it demonstrates that revolutionary bloggers originally benefitted from a form of *intellectual leadership*, which is similar to what Habermas (1962) described in the model of the bourgeois public sphere. This was however not sufficient to consolidate a sustainable counter-discourse, for they suddenly became deprived of intellectual leadership, as soon as a broader range of political actors become involved in the revolutionary debate.

To perform this analysis, I will first set out the context in which Tunisian and Egyptian bloggers report the post-revolutionary debate and feature this particular type of counter-discourse. I will discuss the function of revolutionary blog posts and comment on the tone and discursive strategies that characterise this form of writing. I will then explore two circumstances, in which revolutionaries across the blogosphere manifest the feeling of losing control over the narrative of the revolution. On one hand, I will explore what bloggers describe as an “institutionalisation” of the revolution. I will demonstrate that bloggers commonly witness the fact that leading political institutions strategically attempt at distorting the narrative of the revolution to their advantages.

On the other hand, I will show that, in bloggers’ terms, the revolutionary movement is also affected by the process through which *the revolution becomes mainstream*. Yet unlike the institutionalisation process, this phenomenon, which I will refer to as *mainstreaming*, spontaneously emanates from the revolutionary movement. It announces the transition period during which the revolution ceases to be a counter-discourse to potentially become

another political discourse. As a result, it generates strong divisions among pro-revolutionaries, while rendering the revolutionary debate more chaotic and highly likely to be manipulated.

Overall, I will demonstrate that bloggers agree that digital media contributed to both the *institutionalisation* and *mainstreaming* of the revolution. I will show that cyber-activists themselves came to formulate a critique of cyber-activism as they witnessed the failure of the revolution over the months that followed the 2011 uprisings.

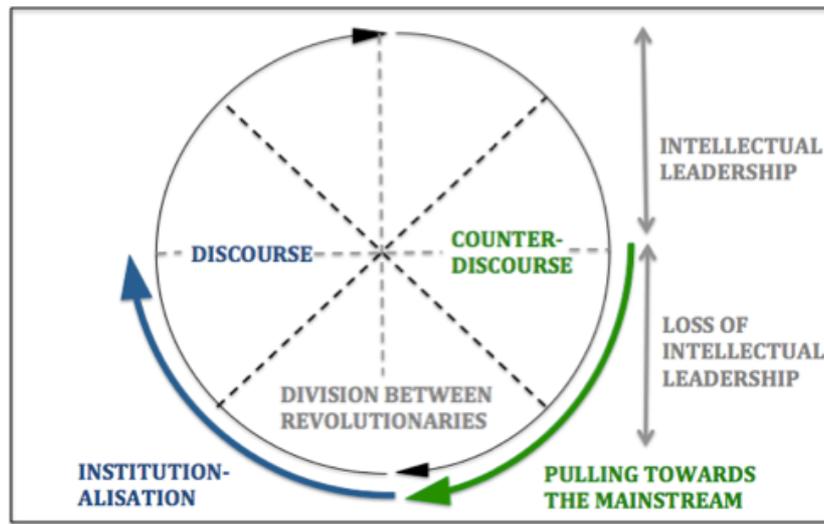
This chapter will provide answers to each of my three research questions, from the perspective of pro-revolutionary activists. It will lead me to comment on how digital media activism affected the first half of the discursive cycle, which I have conceptualised in relation to both Habermas' (1962) and Fraser's (1990) model of the public sphere. In doing so, it will show how connectivity alters the transformation of counter-discourses into sustainable political powers.

### **6.1. Intellectual leadership across the activist blogosphere**

Before entering into this analysis, I shall elaborate on the reasons why the blogosphere appears to be an appropriate field to study the circulation of discourses. This will lead me to clarify the notions of *intellectual leadership* and *institutionalisation* versus *mainstreaming* of the revolution.

In my theoretical chapter, I identified two conceptions of web-activism that rely on two different structures through which discourses/counter-discourses are formed. On one hand, the Habermasian model suggests that the public sphere is shaped by an elite of critical thinkers exercising *intellectual leadership* over public opinion. I proposed that this theory was not entirely antithetical to Fraser's critique of the public sphere and that these two models described two different stages of the cycle of discourse.

Figure 7: Intellectual Leadership in the discursive cycle



In the literature on the Arab Spring, researchers who focused on the pro-revolutionary youth within the middle class suggested that this category of political actors benefitted from a form of *intellectual leadership*.

Studies like that of Breuer (2012) suggested that young technology-savvy pro-revolutionaries among the highly-educated middle class acted on behalf of those who, within the working class, suffered from corruption and police brutality. Pro-revolutionaries among the middle class were driven by the will to fight against repression and censorship as well as by the desire to improve conditions of life for the working poor.

Admittedly, researchers who have approached the revolutionary uprisings beyond the perspective of digital activism acknowledged the significant role of the working class (Beinin, 2012) in consolidating the 2011 mobilisations. As suggested in the third section of my theoretical chapter (Chapter 4) this literature is rather critical with regards to the media narratives, according to which the uprisings could be interpreted as a “Twitter revolution” (Fuchs, 2012; Hirst, 2011; de Souza and Lipietz, 2011, 2012). In order to allow for a broader range of political actors involved in different aspects of the protests, it offers a skeptical perspective on the correlation between technology and democracy:

(...) as observers—from the West as well as from the Maghreb and Middle East—we should perhaps be wary of an (inevitable?) fault: are we, in fact, projecting our own fascinations, our own wishes, rather than seriously trying to understand the complex situations as they ‘are’? The fascination regarding the role of cyberspace and technology in the framework of the ‘Arab Spring’ is a case in point. (Lopes de Souza and Lipietz, 2011: 619)

Accordingly, this literature pays tribute to creative forms of political expression, other than social media, and gives credit to a larger spectrum of political players among the grassroots.

Nevertheless when it comes to digital activism in particular, it should be noted that the revolution was initially relayed by a privileged minority that benefitted from the resources to potentially consolidate a critical theory around the opposition. In spite of the fact that Internet and social media penetration had been increasing, statistics showed a significant digital divide on the eve of the revolution (Salem and Mourtada, 2011)<sup>14</sup>. Cyber-activists were more likely to act as a sort of bourgeois public sphere, by reporting and commenting on some of the injustices suffered by the working class. While contesting the privileges of the ruling elite, they spoke the language of the upper class and were therefore well-placed to draw the attention of the middle class and the international community on their political message. Accordingly, one could easily argue that many cyber-activists in Tunisia and Egypt benefitted from a form of intellectual leadership comparable to that described by Habermas when conceptualising the bourgeois public sphere.

This idea had been formulated by many of the participants I interacted with during the course of my fieldwork, as they reflected on the failure of the revolutionary agenda. During one of the informal conversations I conducted in Cairo, one of my participants illustrated this phenomenon by referring to the famous martyr of the Egyptian revolution Khaled Said<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> United Nations (2013) UN Data country profile, United Nations Statistics Division, <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?>

<sup>15</sup> Young Egyptian who died under police custody in June 2010, after posting a video evidencing an act of corruption by two policemen online. He inspired the famous “Kuluna Khaled Said” (We are all Khaled Said)

In his views the particularity of the Egyptian uprisings – as opposed to the Tunisian one – lay in the fact that it had been triggered by the Khaled Said incident. Whereas the middle class had been aware of the acts of police brutality and corruption endured by the working poor for a very long time, it only became sensitive to this issue when someone from the middle class proved to suffer the same injustices. According to my participant, this was representative of the fact that the gap between social classes remained extremely significant in Egypt. In retrospect, this aspect of the Egyptian revolution foreshadowed the fact that the left-wing intelligentsia – despite its engagement – would struggle to act as a mediator between the working and the middle class.

As I will argue in this chapter, pro-revolutionary bloggers tend to describe the same phenomenon. In reporting the condition of the working poor they intend to stimulate a debate among the middle class and draw the attention of the international community. To some extent, this positions them as mediators and gives them a potentially strategic role to play in consolidating the revolutionary discourse. However, despite the fact that they initially benefit from this intellectual leadership, they also come to the realisation that digital activism progressively isolates them from the labouring class.

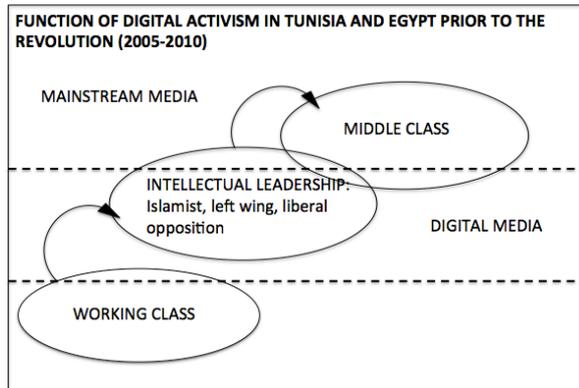
Due to digital divide and the compartmentalisation of the debate on social media, cyber-activists only interacted within the same circles and developed a vocabulary that was essentially understandable by the few people who shared the same social and ideological background. To some extent, this originally produced the conditions for intellectual leadership. As such, it could have been beneficial to the revolution if it had lasted long enough to generate a sustainable ideological framework.

With the sudden decrease of digital divide and the fact that the revolution invigorated citizen interest in politics, however, the first generation of bloggers and web activists very soon became deprived of its intellectual leadership.

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Facebook page, which contributed to the success of the January 25<sup>th</sup> protests and became a symbol of the Egyptian uprisings.

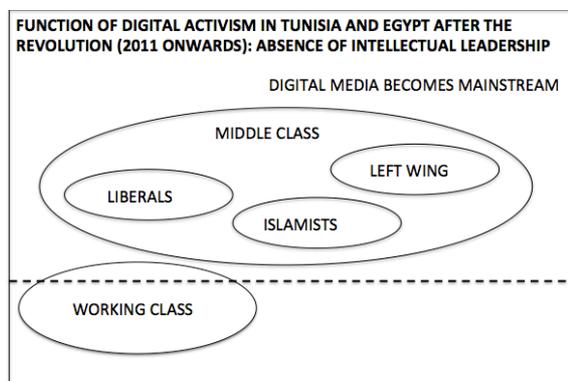
**Figure 8: Digital media and Intellectual Leadership**



As social media became appealing to a broader range of the middle class, the revolutionary counter-discourse was progressively dissolved in the multiplicity of political arguments circulating on social media. This inevitably reduced the impact of the revolutionary youth, while making the opposition highly polarised. Despite the fact that the debate had become more democratic, it was now more chaotic and unable to rely on any ideological and intellectual leadership.

As shown in the graph below, this phenomenon was the direct result of what I will refer to as the *mainstreaming of the revolution*. Everyone was now able to re-apply the concepts as well as the technological tools through which the revolutionary counter-discourse had been formulated. Yet, while this should have heralded the success of the revolution, it resulted in its decline.

**Figure 9: Dissolution of Intellectual Leadership**



## 6.2. The role of the blogosphere the post-revolutionary debate

Before developing an in-depth analysis of this data set, it is worth determining what characterises the pro-revolutionary blogosphere in Tunisia and Egypt. On one hand, bloggers provide facts. They cover the news from an angle, which is different from that of mainstream media, by delivering uncensored information and developing an alternative form of investigative journalism. For this purpose, they may document protests and rallies, provide evidence of abuses of power or report a campaign launched by the opposition.

On the other hand, they formulate a critique of the dominant political discourse and media narratives. In order to do so, they may comment on the strategies applied by political leaders, call for citizens to boycott elections or constitutional referendum, and reflect on the challenges that the revolutionary opposition will have to face.

In doing so, bloggers show how leading political institutions subvert the arguments and ideological vocabulary initially formulated by the opposition. Whereas their early articles state the demands that will constitute the essence of the revolutionary cause, their later writings focus on deconstructing what they consider to be a distortion – or *alienation* – of the revolution.

This inevitably leads them to define the revolution by denying distorted perceptions of it instead of further conceptualising the revolution in their own terms. To some extent, one could argue that this phenomenon already provides evidence for the fact that revolutionary activists progressively lose their intellectual leadership. By positioning themselves in relation to different interpretations of the revolution, they highlight the fact that the opposition no longer has an ideological structure.

In addition, the blogosphere is revealing of the fact that the first generation of pro-revolutionary activists becomes highly polarised. To some extent, this phenomenon is to be understood as part of the natural circulation of discourse. As I suggested earlier, revolutions have always been the theatre of the ideological division between two types of revolutionaries: those who remain ontologically political and those who prove to be

anarchists. Whereas the first group are ready to enter into the political game to implement new institutions, anarchists remain fundamentally attached to the essence of revolutionary action. By doing so, they refuse to reshape counter-discourse into a new institutional discourse, which inevitably leads them to define themselves both *in relation* and *in opposition* to the mainstream. These divisions contribute to make the ideological vocabulary surrounding the revolution more fluid, which facilitates the transition from counter-discourse into power. However, in the absence of intellectual leadership, counter-discourses become so fluid that they are likely to be hijacked by the leading political forces.

To some extent, this reflection applies to both the technological and ideological revolutions that surrounded the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Apart from the Islamist opposition, left wing and liberal revolutionaries had not yet elaborated a consistent ideological alternative to the *feloul*<sup>16</sup> or pro-military government, on the eve of the 2011 protests. In some cases, the challenges that local cyber-activists came to face was revealing of the fact that not only the 2011 Arab revolutions, but also the global revolution instigated by digital media had failed. As argued earlier, emerging and mainstream media had merged and user-generated content had turned into an object of commercialisation, compromising the libertarian utopia that motivated the development of the Internet in its early stage. By incorporating the mainstream and progressively competing on the same market as traditional mass media, online social networks proved to be less appropriate as an instrument of political resistance.

In a talk given at conference on digital activism and documented on his blog<sup>17</sup>, blogger Wael Abbas reports the conflict he had with YouTube after he posted videos showing demonstrations and strikes or evidencing acts of police brutality, torture and election irregularities. The company decided to remove this content, claiming that it was not appropriate as it displayed "graphic or gratuitous violence". This led Abbas to seek for the

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<sup>16</sup> Partisan of the oligarchic elite in power prior to the revolution

<sup>17</sup>It can be retrieved from:

<http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/archive/2012/01/30/ms-social-computing-symposium-2012.html>;

<http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/11/29/youtube.activist/> (CNN.com, 29/11/2007)

support of other bloggers and activists around the world to argue that his videos were of great journalistic interest and that it was relevant to make them available for a large audience. Among other examples I came across in the blogosphere, this illustrates the frustration of revolutionary activists at witnessing the failure of both the political and technological revolution.

The residuals of participatory culture – as it was originally defined by Jenkins (2006) – could now be found in transnational communities of hackers and activists like Anonymous or Wikileaks that contested the monopolies of web corporations such as Google or Facebook. In the aftermath of the revolution, Tunisian and Egyptian bloggers and cyber-activists witness this phenomenon first hand, as they struggle to disseminate counter-discourse among what has become a mainstream audience. They find themselves competing with more powerful instances of discourse and come to the realisation that digital media are regulated by new rules that often prevent alternative political arguments to emerge.

### **6.3. Subjective journalism: a personalised account of the revolution**

One of the characteristics of the blogosphere that stands out from this data set resides in the fact that it addresses politics from an autobiographic perspective. In doing so, it intends to articulate major political issues around citizens' everyday struggles, making the political debate more organic. As expressed by blogger Behayya, cyber-activism as well as all sorts of citizen-led initiatives, aims to make political debate revolve primarily around citizens themselves:

As many commentators have pointed out, the revolution reversed Egyptians' forced alienation from politics. It put politics back in its rightful place, in people's daily lives where it belongs. And not just in the form of freer political speech and expression, but more importantly in the form of political praxis.<sup>18</sup> (Behayya, 2012: Ref. 21)

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18 <http://baheyya.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/striver.html>

Accordingly, bloggers employ different stylistic devices to make the political debate more tangible and report it from the specific perspective of the grassroots.

Occasionally, they document their statements by posting videotapes, and photos that provide an insight into their political activity. For instance, bloggers like Wael Abbas or Fustat, post video footage evidencing clashes between protestors and authorities. Video blog posts are also used to show extracts of national news coverage or national TV campaigns, as a way to comment on the partiality of the media or comment on the military propaganda<sup>19</sup>. These sources are not only meant to attest to journalistic facts. Ultimately, they provide an insight into bloggers' lives and into Egyptians' experiences of the political conjuncture.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2011, the Big Pharaoh published the testimony of a Christian protestor, encountering anti-Christians civilians during the course of a protest and witnessing the Maspero massacre, which took place on October 9<sup>th</sup>. In order to thoroughly report the story through the eyes of the protagonist himself, the blogger published his testimony as a single blog post, leaving the article written in the first person. By directly relaying the voices of those who are the first to witness corruption, repression or sectarianism, bloggers can this show how politics translates into Tunisians' and Egyptians' everyday lives.

Across my data set, the autobiographical dimension stands out in the writings of Zeinobia, Lina Ben Mhenni and the Big Pharaoh. The Big Pharaoh's accounts of the Abbasyah events, published on the 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011, precisely illustrates how bloggers offer a personal insight into politics by reporting the facts from the perspective of the grassroots:

I arrived in Tahrir at around 3:30 pm. The sun was blazing and the square looked a bit empty. "If this number will go on the march to the MOD, the square will be very vulnerable to attackers," I told my friend who accompanied me to the square. An hour later the numbers started getting bigger and we were ready to embark on the long march

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<sup>19</sup> <http://baheyia.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/a-military-constitution.html>

to the MOD. The numbers leaving Tahrir were very good and I was quite confident that with such numbers, the army would think twice before attacking us. Besides, we just wanted to reach the MOD, deliver our message and then head back to the square. Our march was peaceful, just like all our marches.<sup>20</sup> (The Big Pharaoh, 2011: Ref. 49)

In some cases, bloggers contribute to democratise the political debate by adopting an ironic or humoristic tone. This stylistic device is not only applied as a form of subversion and a way to circumvent socio-political taboos. It also contributes to develop a rather informal and conversational debate, to which any layperson can take part. By referring to a set of stereotypes through which Tunisians and Egyptians commonly lampoon their socio-political environment, bloggers participate to de-institutionalise politics. Such witticisms reflect a more intimate form of political deliberation, which commonly occurs in the private sphere or in people's everyday conversations.

Across my sample, this phenomenon stands out from the Tunisian blog *Débat Tunisie*, administered by the caricaturist *\_Z\_*. As a satirist, the anonymous blogger *\_Z\_* formulates humoristic criticism in every blog post, by publishing comics parodying the everyday news. This often brings him/her to challenge a combination of taboos. Indeed, while *\_Z\_* ridicules political leaders, he/she comes to illustrate some of the symbols of the Tunisian culture, which – with respect to the Islamic dogma – should not be represented.

For instance, in February 2011<sup>21</sup>, *\_Z\_* comments on one of his controversial drawing, which caricatures the arrival of the co-founder of the Ennahdha party Rached Ghannouchi in Tunis, after 20 years of exile. In these blog posts, the caricaturist explains his reasons for representing the character of a woman wearing the hijab and celebrating the arrival of Ghannouchi by showing her breasts like a groupie in the crowd:

I took inspiration from a scene in which the Beatles meet an overjoyed crowd of young girls, who throw their bras at them and cry at the sight of the British stars. What I wanted to emphasise was not the boobs of this woman wearing

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.bigpharaoh.org/2011/07/24/my-account-of-what-happened-camel-battle-2/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.debatunisie.com/archives/2011/02/19/20430474.html>

the hijab, but rather [my] criticism of this sudden adulation for the leader of the Islamist movement Ennahda. (...) do not interpret this drawing as an attack to women wearing hijab, to Islam or to Ghannouchi. My caricatures (...) are a provocation against the low spirit of adulation.<sup>22</sup> (\_Z\_, 2011: Ref. 155)



His/her statement demonstrates that derision often originates from developing associations of ideas or references to popular culture. As such it is not entirely driven by the desire to be subversive. It can rather be understood as being part of the process through which bloggers advocate a more vernacular form of political debate.

Similarly, the Big Pharaoh published a set of ironic blog posts<sup>23</sup> during the course of the 2011 Egyptian Parliamentary elections. In the articles in question, he imagines how the Cairo's districts of Heliopolis and Nasr city would claim their independence and found their own federation after electing non-Muslim-Brotherhood/Salafi MPs. This humoristic fiction draws on common Egyptian in jokes about the different populations of Cairo's suburban localities.

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<sup>22</sup> *Je me suis inspiré d'une scène où les Beatles sortant de l'aéroport sont accueillis par une foule délirante de filles qui leur jettent leurs soutien-gorges et qui hurlent à la vue des stars anglaises. Ce sur quoi je voulais mettre le doigt, c'est nullement les nichons de cette femme voilée, mais simplement critiquer cette adulation subite envers le leader du mouvement islamiste Ennahdha. (...) ne voyez dans ce dessin nulle attaque envers les voilées ou l'islam ni même envers Ghannouchi. Mes caricatures (...) sont une provocation contre le bas esprit de l'adulation (...).*

<http://www.debatunisie.com/archives/2011/02/19/20430474.html>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.bigpharaoh.org/2011/12/02/welcome-to-the-republic-of-heliopolis/>;  
<http://www.bigpharaoh.org/2011/12/07/the-heliopolis-nasr-city-federation/>

Like the data collected from the activist blogosphere, the interviews conducted on the field outlined the fact that online activism significantly relied on subtle forms of irony, caricature and satire. Among the other participants interviewed for this study, 50 years old writer and social media activist Mukhtar<sup>24</sup> described to what extent such user-generated content media was applied to popularise the language of the political debate:

On Facebook I write whatever I want, whatever comes to my mind, I'm not apologizing, I use harsh language, even mixing, even creating a new type of writing where formal language is mixed with ['ammyia]<sup>25</sup> is mixed with slang. Facebook, I mean, I wrote articles shared by many people, it was not just the few people, who either are totally politically correct. Some of my friends, they use, I mean we are like a group, myself and [...],<sup>26</sup> whoever we are not, it's not that we are thinkers and that we use big words and we are wise and blablabla...All of us are very street guys on Facebook, we smash all borders and all academic shit. And when I write an article for a newspaper I think twice, one time, two times and three times about my words, in a sort of inner control. (Mukhtar, cf. Interview transcripts: 66)

Beyond the fact that social media considerably accelerated the spread of the political message, it also contributed to democratise political debate by making it more organic, less formal and more representative of the reality of the streets. This aspect of digital activism would however be affected by the fact that institutional political players would progressively become prominent in the social media sphere.

#### **6.4. Institutionalisation of the revolution: competing narratives**

Across the blogosphere, the criticism formulated against the actions of the RCD and NDP parties prior to the revolution still applies to the Tunisian transitional government and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt. In Tunisia, bloggers almost unanimously condemn the failure of Ghannouchi's government at communicating on the most topical and controversial matters and responding to the people's demands. In this regard, bloggers' counter-discourse retains the same primary function as before the 2011

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<sup>24</sup> A pseudonym is used to ensure the anonymity of the participant

<sup>25</sup> Colloquial Arabic

<sup>26</sup> The two names mentioned here have been removed to preserve the anonymity of the participant.

uprisings. Yet additionally to denouncing corruption, power abuses and repression, the post-revolutionary blogosphere aims at restoring the revolutionary agenda, which activists consider as being affected by distorted narratives of the revolution.

Despite their diverging political views or ideological backgrounds, bloggers commonly witness the fact that the revolution and its technological tools are progressively being hijacked by political institutions. While the revolution was initially inclusive and had gathered citizens from different socio-political backgrounds, its *institutionalisation* divided it into different exclusive visions of post-revolutionary Tunisia/Egypt. Citizen journalists argued that this phenomenon had turned the debate into series of polemics and controversies, while making the entire vocabulary surrounding the revolution highly confusing.

Tunisian blogger Under Ashes explicitly formulates this idea as he/she reflects on how multiple and diverging interpretations of the revolution circulated across both social and traditional mass media. Simultaneously, the argument of one's opponent would systematically consist in a conspiracy theory, in which liberals, left wing or conservatives would successively be depicted as enemies of the so-called legitimate revolutionary agenda:

Almost every sentence circulating in the media does not have the same meaning for the speaker as for its reader or listener; to begin with, of course, the term "revolution", as well as its preservation, its consolidation, its martyrs, its injured, its enemies and its transitional justice. You should not be mistaken before pronouncing the term, if you do not want the recipient to find further evidence for his misinterpretation in your words. For instance, "conspiracy" is not [understood as] a replica of the Troika but [as] the "democratic" opposition; and this "conspiracy" is not a "progressive" opposition. They all agreed on the existence of the conspiracy, but every party is fighting against it. Meaning is not determined by "logic" (...) but in accordance to the position of the group to which the speaker belongs. (...) a mess of meaning in which the individual pants, searching for a group, which would share (almost) the same understanding of the words, even if this means sacrificing just a little bit of freedom of speech...The position

[hidden] behind a particular meaning might be quasi-sectarian, which is natural in a society that suffered serious obstacles in the determination of its identity for decades (...) the [most] important [thing] being that all citizens understand a meaning in the same way. (Under Ashes, 2012: Ref. 40)<sup>27</sup>

The last sentence of this quote perfectly illustrates the fact that the revolutionary discourse had become polysemic and fluid. The process through which opposing political groups competed for different conceptions of the revolution was especially problematic, as Tunisians, like most Arab countries, had been facing a major identity crisis since the colonial period.

The dispersion of the revolutionary narrative manifested itself in the way leading political institutions advertised themselves as well in the process through which members of civil society incorporated the debate online. I will now exemplify the first of these phenomena, on the basis of my blogosphere data set.

### 6.5. The institutionalisation process: hijacking of the revolutionary agenda

What I will here refer to as the *institutionalisation* of the revolution is the process through which dominant political institutions and their leaders - such as the former RCD, the SCAF or the Islamist parties – claimed credit for the achievement of the 2011 uprisings. In this case, the term *institutions* designates long-established political groups, as opposed to fluid networks of independent activists.

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<sup>27</sup> طبعا بداية إلهاء، والمس تدم وقارئها قائلها لدى الشيء نفس تعني لا إعلاميًا تداولها يقع تقريبا عبارة كل تنطق لكبي. الانتقالية وعدالتها وأعدائها وجرحها وشهدائها اوتحصينها حمايتها عن فضلها، "ثورة" بعبارة "المؤامرة" لبيست مثلا، إكلامك إلى "دليل" تضريف أن معنك المتلقّي يخطئ ألا أردت إذا عليكي يجب ما، بعبارة "تقديمية" المعارضة نسخة) "المؤامرة" هي ولا ( "الديمقراطية" المعارضة نسخة) "المؤامرة" هي (الترويكا نسخة) وفق بل، (...) "المنطق" وفق يتم لا المعاني تقرير. ضده أنها يجرم طرف كل ولكن المؤامرة، وجود على متفق الكل. "منطق" يلهث التي المعاني من فوضى هي (...). المتكلم إلهاء ينتمي التي الجماعة رأي وراء التلقائي الاصطفاف "منطق" بشيء ذلك سبيل في ضحكى إن حتى للكل مات، (تقريباً) الفهم نفس تقاسم تبال الجماعة عن بحثا الفرد فيها منذ يعاني مجتمع في طبيعياً معين معنى وراء الطائف في شبه الاصطفاف هذا يكون قد...فكره حرية من قليل غير المواطنين، جميع ن،المواطنو يفهمه واحدا؛ معنى المولود يكون أن المهم (...). هويته تحديدي في جمّة مشكل من عقود الطريفة بنفس <http://underash.blogspot.co.uk/2012/12/blog-post.html>

Such process does not only apply to the revolutionary counter-discourse per se, but also to the technological tools used by the revolutionary opposition. That is to say that Internet and social media, originally applied by a minority of activists, progressively started to be used by leading political organisations in an attempt to compete against the liberal and left wing youth. As mentioned above, this phenomenon is highly problematic for the pro-revolutionary debate, since it creates confusion by conveying divergent perspectives of the revolution. Bloggers express the impression of being restricted in their freedom of speech and constrained to justify every statement in such a polemic context.

As one of the most famous Tunisian bloggers, Lina Ben Mhenni often comes to comment on press articles, social media posts and other blogs referring to her statements, responding to or rectifying distortions of her arguments. This in itself illustrates to what extent the function of web activism shifted from condemning human rights violations to competing for a different narrative of the revolution. Web activism was then formally involved in the political discourse and bloggers were forced to anticipate and respond to controversial rumours.

In a text posted in January 2012, as she was denying having been interviewed for a pro-Israeli website, Lina Ben Mhenni commented on the many conspiracy theories circulating on social media that benefit the counter-revolution:

It is not because 90% of the Tunisians, who are on Facebook claimed to be (...) members of the cyber police or State security (...) and like to imagine that bloggers and cyber-activists are all CIA agents, Zionists and freemasons, that I shall respond to each and every one of them (...). I don't have time to lose with conspiracy theories that have so much success among the Facebook youth (administrators of Facebook pages created after the 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010 (...)). I don't have to respond to the mockery of traitors, who are paid to discredit cyber-activists (...) following the orders of certain political

parties (...) nor the delirium of so called revolutionaries eaten away by jealousy and envy. (Ben Mhenni, 2012: Ref. 38)<sup>28</sup>

A year after the revolution, not only did her description of the social media sphere suggest that the ruling elite had become as present and even more powerful as young revolutionaries online. It also led to think that the legitimacy attributed to some of the prominent figures of cyber-activism in Tunisia had generated conflicts among revolutionaries.

To a greater extent, the challenges faced by cyber-activists were directly induced by digital media for two reasons; first, because it was within everyone's reach, including the supporters of the counter-revolution. Secondly, it had failed at creating strong and consistent linkages between members of the activist opposition. As I will now show, this second aspect, however, was rather due to a slightly different phenomenon, which I will conceptualise as the *mainstreaming of the revolution*.

Similarly to Lina Ben Mhenni, Yassin Ayari contests the fact that, after the 2011 uprisings, official political events take place in the name of the revolution to promote long-established parties and political organisations. With regards to this, he condemns the 15<sup>th</sup> August 2011 demonstration organised by the UGTT<sup>29</sup>. According to the blogger, the Tunisian union founded in 1946 had not been pro-active in supporting the January mobilisations, and was now competing with the UTT<sup>30</sup>, a new trade-union organisation for workers' memberships. On the eve of the demonstration, Yassin Ayari argues that the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ce n'est pas parce que 90% des Tunisiens qui sont sur Facebook se sont auto-proclamés (...) membres de la cyber-police ou de la sûreté d'état (...) et s'amuse à imaginer que les blogueurs et les cyber-activistes sont tous des agents de la CIA, des sionistes, et des francs-maçons que je dois répondre à chacun d'entre eux (...). Je n'ai pas de temps à perdre avec les théories conspirationnistes qui font tant d'émules parmi les jeunes de Facebook (les administrateurs de pages Facebook apparues après le 17 Décembre 2010, (...)). Je n'ai pas à répondre ni à la dérision de vendus qui sont payés pour discréditer les cyber-activistes (...) sous les ordres de certains partis politiques (...) ni aux délires des pseudo-révolutionnaires rongés par la jalousie et l'envie.* <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/droit-de-reponse.html>

<sup>29</sup> Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail

<sup>30</sup> Union Tunisienne des Travailleurs

union's leaders promoting the event intended to increase their popularity and that parties would benefit from a new opportunity to advertise themselves:

So the UGTT is calling for this demonstration on 15<sup>th</sup> August to restore its image and position itself as the leader of the revolution and bla bla bla.! A real caricature. And the other parties then? The ones that mobilise (supposedly) for the 15<sup>th</sup> August? It's simple, they just want to be present, they don't want to miss the event, it's like a wedding, every party don't want to miss the pictures! even the parties that supported, are supporting the government (...) or those that got disengaged from the streets after just a few political messages (Nahdha<sup>31</sup>) will be there! weird right? (Ayari, 2011: Ref.7)<sup>32</sup>

In both cases, bloggers show how the revolution that had initially successfully gathered the Tunisian and Egyptian people in its diversity, had become an arena for competition as the social and philosophical debate surrounding the revolution was being politicised. Ultimately, the revolution had reached everyone. Yet, apart from the Islamist parties such as Ennahdha and the Muslim Brotherhood, none of the political actors involved had managed to consolidate an overarching ideological framework to sustain it. The concept of the revolution had therefore remained flexible and progressively split into different narratives, intended to serve diverging political agendas. Pro-revolutionaries were no longer enjoying the feeling of social cohesion they had experienced in the early days of the uprisings.

## 6.6. Polarisation and lack of consensus

Along with the confusion, bloggers witnessed how the institutionalisation of the revolution had created strong social divisions, disrupting citizens' and policy-makers' ability to

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<sup>31</sup> Conservative party Ennahdha

<sup>32</sup> *Donc l'UGTT, appelle a cette manifestation du 15 Aout, pour redorer son blason, et se positionner comme le leader de la révolution et bla bla bla.! une vraie caricature. Et les autres partis alors? qui se mobilisent (za3ma za3ma) pour ce 15 Aout ? C'est simple, ils veulent juste marquer la présence, ils ne veulent pas manquer l'évènement, c'est comme un mariage, chaque parti ne veut pas rater les photos! même les partis qui ont soutenu, soutiennent le gouvernement (Tajdid..) ou ceux qui se sont désengagés de la rue après quelques messages politiques (Nahdha (...)) vont être la! bizarre hein ?;*  
<http://mel7it3.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/le-15-aout-la-mascarade.html>

negotiate and reach consensus. In Tunisia, blogger Fares Mabrouk deplors the polarisation of the debate following the election of the Constituent Assembly. Due to the divisions against the Tunisian union UGTT, the Secular elites in power and the leading party Ennahda, deliberations about the future of the country entirely centre on the conflict between secularists and Islamists:

By all means, the political sphere recomposed, or - shall I say - became polarised again. The interests of the corporate circles, composite middle class and the most deprived (...), which used to be commonly shared, are diverging again. In this regard, the conflict between UGTT and the party in power Ennahda is a revealing prism. (...) On the political level, the pro-State movement, which is fundamentally secular and constitutionalist, refuses to consider Ennahda as a properly Tunisian emergence (...) I consider this position as nonsensical. Why shall we deny our history in such a way (youssefisme, islamo-destourisme, MTI become Ennahda in 1989) and dig heels in the mention of our Arabic Muslim identity? <sup>33</sup> (Mabrouk, 2013: Ref. 29)

Likewise, when commenting on the controversial constitutional decree issued by president Morsi in November 2012, Egyptian blogger Baheyya suspects the opposition formed by the National Salvation Front to be opportunistic. Instead of seeking negotiation and compromise, opponents would focus on discrediting the democratically elected government, which inevitably benefitted the army:

Morsi became another dictator with whom you never negotiate, not a fumbling elected president who can and must be checked. Egyptian politics became a zero-sum battle between a moral, valiant opposition and a sinister power-hungry theocracy. Morsi is Mubarak redux. The opposition must be uncompromising, because compromise is defeat. (...) Still, I'm stunned at

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<sup>33</sup> *Quoiqu'il en soit, le champ politique s'est recomposé, ou devrais-je dire repolarisé. Et les intérêts naguère communs des milieux d'affaires, des classes moyennes composites et des plus défavorisés (...) divergent à nouveau. La querelle entre l'UGTT et le parti au pouvoir Ennahda est à ce titre un prisme révélateur. (...) Au plan strictement politique, le courant étatiste, farouchement laïque et constitutionnaliste refuse de considérer Ennahda comme une émergence proprement tunisienne. (...) je considère cette position aberrante. Pourquoi s'aveugler à ce point sur notre histoire (youssefisme, islamo-destourisme, MTI devenu Ennahda en 1989) et se braquer à l'évocation de l'identité arabo-musulmane de notre pays ?* <http://www.faresmabrouk.com/2013/05/27/lhorizon-du-possible-1/>

Morsi's opponents' failure to act like a credible opposition ever since his November 21 decrees. They could barely contain their glee at his cascading failures, outdoing each other in branding him a dictator and clambering atop the rising tide of popular protest (...) The sight of politicians refusing to negotiate with an elected president but then agreeing to the military's "we're all family" shindig is beyond pitiful. How much more effective to have negotiated with Morsi a cancellation of his decree and a postponement of the referendum. (Baheyya, 2012: Ref. 18)<sup>34</sup>

As described by blogger Under Ashes in the Tunisian context, this contributed to build the polemic environment in which every political camp competed for a different interpretation of the revolution. Political leaders with a long-term career in politics formed a coalition against the Muslim Brotherhood (the National Salvation Front) regardless of their ideological background. In doing so, they paved the way to the 30<sup>th</sup> June coup d'état (2013), which the military elite used as a substitute to the 25<sup>th</sup> January revolution (2011). Overall, the debate surrounding the revolution had become opportunistic and subjected to political controversies.

The same criticism applies to the Muslim Brotherhood, as they gain the monopoly of the political scene in 2012 and start distancing themselves from the youth activist opposition. As stated by blogger The Big Pharaoh in October 2012, divisions arose between the conservative party and its younger protesters. This highlighted that what appeared to be the only influential and institutionalised movement among the opposition – along with the Dostour party mentioned in this blog article – was ironically becoming too institutionalised to incorporate street political action:

Last week, after the clashes in Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood Facebook account wrote a status saying that the MB supporters were not present in Tahrir after 6 pm. I clicked the comments button to know what people on the MB's official fanpage thought of the MB's attempt to distance themselves from what their supporters did on that day. (...) Not a single comment was positive! And that was the official MB fanpage. (The Big Pharaoh, 2012: Ref. 79)<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> <http://baheyya.blogspot.co.uk/2012/12/on-morsis-opponents.html>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.bigpharaoh.org/2012/10/20/we-are-yearning-for-a-viable-alternative/>

Yet in this particular case, The Big Pharaoh also shows to what extent youth activists are incoherently seeking a legitimate and well-structured political group likely to represent them, while pursuing street mobilisations. At this stage of the discursive cycle, activists witness the fact that the revolutionary momentum might have reached its critical mass. While contesting the institutions currently represented on the political scene, they start considering institutionalised politics as the only way to access power:

There is no clear data as to how much support the MB did loose, but any observer of Egyptian politics will tell you that “MB the victim” is definitely not like “MB the ruler”. The last presidential elections, especially round one, proved that there are millions of Egyptians who are willing to vote for an alternative to the MB. A viable alternative though. (...) We don’t have an alternative that is 1) organized 2) has money 3) and can convince people. (The Big Pharaoh, 2012: Ref. 79)

This statement perfectly illustrates the paradox I mentioned earlier, which is intrinsic to any counter-discourse. On one hand, the youth opposition rises against the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood does not incorporate street activists, portraying itself *as a ruler rather than a victim*. To some extent, the conservative party precisely loses its popularity among the revolutionary opposition precisely because it is now perceived as an institutional power. Yet on the other hand, The Big Pharaoh claims that the success of the revolutionary agenda depends on such form of well-organised structure. Such contradictions can only be explained by understanding power and counter-power as part of the same cyclical process. In fact, they reveal how the activist community is torn between the need to keep developing a critical theory and the desire to implement their own institutional discourse.

Pro-revolutionary activists commonly witness the fact that the revolution is easily distorted, as soon as it is formally debated in the sphere of institutional politics. They describe this phenomenon as problematic, since it defeats the original purpose of revolutionary activism: to defend an alternative form of political debate, which stems from the reality of the street and from the demands of the grassroots. Simultaneously, they come to the realisation that political change may only be achieved by incorporating the elites in power. Yet in the absence of intellectual leadership, the revolution is being progressively

reshaped by institutional politics and cannot be sustained by a *viable alternative* to the leading political forces<sup>36</sup> (The Big Pharaoh, 2012: Ref. 79).

### 6.7. Mainstreaming of the revolution: rising popularity of the revolutionary debate

In May 2012, Tunisian blogger Slim Amamou publishes a blog post in which he comments on three video clips directed by Romain Gravas, which he interprets as three different critical representations of imperialism. One of the short-films – entitled “No Church in the Wild” – represents clashes between the police and young protestors and appears for him as a tribute to the revolution.

As he comments on the uprisings as a source of artistic inspiration, Slim Amamou celebrates the fact that the revolution reaches a *mainstream* audience:

Yesterday, when I saw *No church in the wild* it confronted me to the work of Romain Gravas. He is clearly a propagandist master of our own. (...) What makes me really happy is that the video will probably be released on MTV. Because it's Jay Z and Kanye West who sing. The revolution would never have dreamed that much exposure. The mainstream revolution. In good French: la révolution populaire. Popular. Pure genius<sup>37</sup>. (Slim Amamou, 2012: Ref. 88)

By celebrating the *mainstream revolution* and defining himself as part the *anti-imperialism propagandists*, the blogger suggests that marginalised counter-discourses are meant to reach the masses. His perspective perfectly illustrates a particular type of revolutionary action, which intends to bring the debate on the political scene and raise the attention of mainstream media. On that basis, Slim Amamou is particularly representative of what I

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.bigpharaoh.org/2012/10/20/we-are-yearning-for-a-viable-alternative/>

<sup>37</sup> Hier, quand j'ai vu *No church in the wild*, ça a conforté mes idées sur l'oeuvre de Romain Gavras. C'est clairement un maître propagandiste de notre bord. (...) Ce qui me fait le plus plaisir, c'est que ce clip va probablement passer sur MTV. Parce que c'est Jay Z et Kanye West qui chantent. La révolution n'aurait jamais révé de tant d'exposition. La révolution mainstream. En bon français : La révolution populaire. Populaire. Du pur génie. (Slim Amamou, May 31st 2012, *La propagande anti-impérialiste de Romain Garavas*, <http://nomemoryspace.wordpress.com/2012/05/31/romain-gavras/>)

referred to earlier as *political revolutionaries*. With regards to that, he had been criticised among Tunisian cyber-activists for being named Secretary of state under the 2011 interim government<sup>38</sup>.

Whereas he interprets the rise of a *mainstream revolution* as an achievement, many bloggers see the popularisation of the uprisings as the very reason for its failure in the long run. Yet I would insist on the fact that this phenomenon is to be distinguished from the institutionalisation process I described above.

In fact, whilst the institutionalisation of the revolution is driven by leading political institutions - such as the former RCD, Ennahda, the Muslim Brotherhood or the SCAF - *mainstreaming* is induced by revolutionaries, who seek recognition for their cause. As a result, whenever bloggers deplore the mainstreaming of the revolution, they initiate a very introspective critique, which also leads them to question the benefits of digital media.

What I conceptualise here as mainstreaming of the revolution is the process through which the revolutionary counter-discourse becomes appealing to the masses. This refers to the fact that many individuals from the low middle class, who were not part of the activist intelligentsia and who never manifested interest in politics prior to the uprisings, suddenly incorporated the public debate. Most certainly participative media usage played a significant part in the mainstreaming process, enabling anyone to contribute to what had become a *fashionable* revolution. As he recalls the history of Tunisian activism, blogger Fares Mabrouk describes how digital media consumers themselves – along with traditional mass media – contributed to raise confusion about the actual meaning of the ideological vocabulary that surrounded the revolution:

Today on the Internet, which charms the crowds of commentators, and whose revolutionary role shall not be underestimated (...) the beautiful story of this genesis proves to be wrong. Because the story has evolved. Because the Tunisians, witnessing and being active on the Web obstruct the official story with their personal experience, distorting the enlightenment of the emerging

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<sup>38</sup> [http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/tunisie-slim-amamou-blogueur-ministre-demissionne\\_996038.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/tunisie-slim-amamou-blogueur-ministre-demissionne_996038.html)

ideals. (...) The poetry is affected. The “spring”, [is] less than an event, rather a process, which varies. Romantically referred to as *Jasmine*<sup>39</sup>, “2.0” by foreign media, the Tunisian revolution has been reversed over two years. (Fares Mabrouk, 2013: Ref. 29)<sup>40</sup>

To some extent, *mainstreaming* and *institutionalisation* are interrelated and could easily be conceptualised as part of the same phenomenon. Both of these concepts illustrate the fact that the new political elite would have to position itself with regards to the revolution in order to regain legitimacy in the political scene. Together they show that the narratives surrounding the January 2011 events had become central to public debate. However, in the case of what bloggers describe as the institutionalisation of the revolution, this process was strategically driven by leading political forces, well-established parties and power institutions.

Alternatively, the mainstreaming of the revolution was unintentionally induced by the success of revolutionary activists in drawing the attention of the media and the international community. Due to the increase of participants incorporating the debate, disparities among revolutionaries became more visible and their action more chaotic. Unlike the institutionalisation of the revolution, the mainstreaming process suggested that, to some extent, revolutionaries might have been the victims of their own success.

By claiming for visibility and recognition, activists traded intellectual leadership for celebrity. Whilst they had felt empowered by the relatively small-scale (bourgeois) public sphere, in which they were originally interacting, they could not control the large-scale

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<sup>39</sup> Reference to a recurrent terminology applied by French speaking media to refer to the Tunisian 2011 revolution: *Révolution de Jasmin*.

<sup>40</sup> *Aujourd’hui, sur cet internet qui ravit la foule des commentateurs, et dont le rôle révolutionnaire ne saurait être sous-estimé (...) le beau récit de cette origine s’est écorné. Car l’histoire a continué. Car les Tunisiens et les Tunisiennes, présents et témoins sur le net, obstruent le récit officiel de leurs expériences personnelles, voilant ainsi la lumière des idéaux naissants. (...) La poésie en prend un coup. Le « printemps », moins qu’un événement, est d’abord un déroulement qui varie. Romantiquement parée par les médias étrangers de jasmin, « 2.0 », la révolution tunisienne s’est donc, depuis deux ans, retournée sur elle même.*

<http://www.faresmabrouk.com/2013/05/27/lhorizon-du-possible-1/>

deliberations that would progressively take shape during the post-revolutionary phase. It is precisely in this context that conflicts arose among revolutionaries:

Internet under Ben Ali was good! We were nice and innocents and Ammar 404<sup>41</sup> was our only enemy. We didn't take ourselves too seriously and we knew how to remain united, when unfortunately one of us was caught. But here we are, after the so-called 2.0 revolution, things slightly changed. Cyber-heroes emerged from the crowd and became very serious people. Some have been appointed as secretaries of State<sup>42</sup>, other host TV shows and some others publish books. Before January 14<sup>th</sup> there was a minimum of decency between cyber dissidents, we would have polite arguments through our blogs. Today, a small conflict and the justice gets involved. Just like this stupid fight between the "star of the web" Yassine el Ayari and the "blogger celebrity" Sami ben Abdallah (...) Without to mention the many facebook administrators, who became millionaires by prostituting their pages for the parties. (*\_Z\_*, 2011: Ref. 194)<sup>43</sup>

It should be noticed that the last sentence of this quote precisely illustrates the correlation I mentioned above between mainstreaming and institutionalisation. Cyber-activists' successful online campaigns led parties and political officials to take advantage of social media, which was then perceived by activists themselves as another form of mainstream media. Over the months that followed the 2011 uprisings, bloggers paradoxically became highly critical with regards to the blogosphere and social media sphere.

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<sup>41</sup> Locution designating the error message appearing on the screen when the government would prevent access to the Internet. Analogically, the locution is commonly used to refer to online forms of repression and censorship.

<sup>42</sup> Reference to famous blogger and Twitter activist Slim Amammou

<sup>43</sup> *C'était bien l'internet sous Ben Ali! Nous étions innocents et gentils et nous avons Ammar 404 pour seul ennemi. Nous ne nous prenions pas trop au sérieux et nous savions rester solidaires quand par malheur l'un de nous se faisait choper. Mais voilà après la dite révolution 2.0 les choses ont un peu changé. Des cyber-héros ont émergé du lot et sont devenus des gens très sérieux. Certains se sont fait nommés secrétaires d'état, d'autres animent des émissions télé puis d'autres encore éditent des bouquins (...) Avant le 14 Janvier il y avait un minimum de décence entre cyberdissidents et on s'enguelait gentiment par blog interposé. Aujourd'hui une petite querelle et c'est la justice qui s'en mêle. Telle cette pitoyable scène de ménage entre "la star du net" Yassine el Ayari et le "blogueur vedette" Sami Ben Abdallah. (...) Sans parler des nombreux admins de facebook qui sont devenus des millionnaires en prostituant leurs pages aux partis politiques.*  
<http://www.debatunisie.com/archives/2011/09/11/22005894.html>

After claiming recognition, pro-revolutionary bloggers progressively developed an introspective critique of cyber-activism, arguing that digital media, just as well as traditional mass media, could easily be manipulated to convey the dominant discourse. In December 2011, Tunisian blogger Yassin Aayari wrote a tribute to Zouhayer Yahyaoui. Known as one of the first Tunisian cyber-dissidents, the activist died in 2005 after being prosecuted, tortured and imprisoned for his political activities. By referring to Yahyaoui, Ayari draws a distinction between an early generation of cyber activism that he describes as genuine and deserving, and a later generation of bloggers, which he regards as essentially driven by the need for social recognition:

I want to say a couple of words (...) to the cheap bloggers and Internet users (including me): you are nothing, I am nothing, (...) some lied, others said what we wanted to hear, and others, the mabrouks, served, but overall, this celebrities war for recognition is nothing. There is no one but Zouhayer, who deserves to be quoted, honoured, (...) so I am asking you for once to forget your pride, your ego (...) your differences and to militate. (Ayari, 2011: Ref. 13)<sup>44</sup>

This introspective critique comes with the realisation that bloggers would no longer benefit from intellectual leadership. By making the revolution mainstream before embedding it in a sustainable ideological framework, activists facilitated its alienation. The alienation of the revolution was the result of leading political forces pulling towards its institutionalisation as much as a consequence of revolutionaries' desire to be heard, although they could not be fully understood.

### **6.8. The Bubble effect: desperate attempt to recover intellectual leadership**

Revolutionary activists - as it appears in the blogosphere - witness how much of their own political action contributes to the *institutionalisation* of the revolution. Their introspection

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<sup>44</sup> *Je vais dire deux mots (...) aux blogueurs et internautes à deux balles (dont je fais partie) : vous n'êtes rien, je ne suis rien, (...) certains ont menti, d'autres ont dit ce qu'on veut entendre, et d'autres les mabrouks ont servi, mais tout compte fait, cette guerre des stars, de reconnaissance n'est rien, y'a que Zouhayer qui mérite d'être cité, honoré, (...), donc je vous demande pour une fois, d'oublier votre orgueil, égo, (...) vos différences, et de militer.* <http://mel7it3.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/meritons-nous-tunezine-non-mais-on-peut.html>

brings them to formulate another criticism, which applies to digital media as much as to revolutionary activism in general and which was also raised by many of my participants as I conducted my fieldwork. Egyptian bloggers and members of the liberal and left wing opposition in particular condemn the fact that revolutionaries had been exclusively interacting within their own sphere of influence.

In their views, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter had led them to identify a restricted audience of followers, who would prove to have a similar socioeconomic background and originally share the same opinions. To a large extent, spreading their political message online had led them to believe that their respective interpretation of the revolutionary agenda was commonly understood. Due to online-based political action, revolutionaries failed at anticipating the challenges of reaching a critical mass of supporters among the broader population, especially within the deprived working class. Most importantly, they had been developing a vocabulary and a communication strategy that would essentially reach out to a very small proportion of the educated middle class:

The revolutionaries are still living in their own self created bubble. They only talk to themselves, they rarely talk to the people on the street. They are all cocooned in their own meetings, facebook pages and on twitter. There has been very little attempt to burst this bubble and talk directly to the public (...) When I raise this point, fellow revolutionaries often confront me with this rationale: revolutions are done by the minority and we can never expect the majority to support us; they will only cheer when we win just as they did when Mubarak stepped down last year. (The Big Pharaoh, 2012: Ref. 70)<sup>45</sup>

This argument corroborates the postcolonial critique (Allagui and Kuebler 2011; Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Lipietz and Lopes de Souza, 2011, 2012) in suggesting that social media was not entirely representative of the reality of streets. Besides, it indicates that, although social media was progressively reaching a mainstream audience, many young revolutionaries remained convinced that they could recreate the conditions for intellectual leadership.

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.bigpharaoh.org/2012/05/08/what-did-egypts-revolutionaries-do-wrong/>

To some extent, the idea according to which *revolutions rely on the minority* contradicts some aspects of the postcolonial critique. As mentioned earlier, this literature precisely intends to demonstrate the self-determination of the Arab people (Benhabib, 2011), by arguing that a broader range of political actors, aside from the social media sphere, contributed to the success of the 2011 protests (Allagui and Kuebler 2011; Fuchs, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Lipietz and Lopes de Souza, 2011, 2012). From this perspective, the greatest achievement of the uprisings is that it succeeded in mobilising citizens from different social classes (Benhabib, 2011; Breuer, 2012).

However in this particular statement, The Big Pharaoh claims that revolutionaries had remained a minority. Despite their devotion to the working class and their desire to involve more citizens in public debate, they had failed at successfully communicating their political message to the masses. This explains why bloggers and social media activists developed their own audience on social media, hoping to recover some form of intellectual leadership.

Such contradictions could only be explained by the fact that, although left wing and liberal revolutionaries hoped for a fully participative debate, they were originally part of a rather elitist public sphere. Through social media, their ideas and arguments had been circulating among a restricted circle of young middle class activists that benefitted from the same material and intellectual resources to appreciate the revolutionary discourse. This phenomenon often described by my participants as the “bubble effect” (Samira, cf. Interview transcript: 31; Farid cf. interview transcripts: 89) of social media had most certainly provided the youth opposition with a feeling of empowerment but led them to believe that the revolution was commonly understood. In this regard, their perception of a revolution led by the minority perfectly illustrates my concept of intellectual leadership. With the popularisation and mainstreaming of the revolution, activists see their discourse being simplified and formatted for the general public. Yet by providing greater access to the revolutionary debate, revolutionaries would see their counter-discourse being both misunderstood and strategically manipulated. On that basis, the quotation from The Big

Pharaoh explicitly expresses the paradox of an opposition willing to empower the people but reluctant to renounce its intellectual leadership.

### **6.9. Conclusion to empirical analysis 1: Connectivity, mainstream and absence of intellectual leadership**

In conclusion, the conflicting relationship between bloggers and digital activism is revealing of a deeper dilemma. Whenever the revolutionary discourse reaches the masses and is likely to be shaped by a wider diversity of actors, activists see their intellectual leadership restrained as well as their opportunity to develop a sustainable critical theory. Paradoxically, although bloggers aspire to empower the grassroots and aim at democratising the political debate, they come to deplore the fact that the opposition – apart from Islamist parties - does not rely on any intellectual leadership.

This dilemma explains why, across this data set, pro-revolutionary bloggers appear to be divided with regards to how digital activism should contribute to the revolutionary agenda. Whereas some of them see it as a way to raise awareness about the revolutionary cause, others contest the fact that digital activism deviates media attention from the streets to the sphere of institutional politics. Instead of turning critical theory into practice, digital media disseminated critical theory as it was still gestating. Consequently, the revolution relied on a highly fluid ideological vocabulary, which could easily be redefined by political leaders.

The mainstreaming of the revolution led activists to lose intellectual leadership and, in doing so, facilitated the institutionalisation of the revolution. Although digital media democratised the political debate, it made the revolutionary discourse too fluid to efficiently reflect the perspective of the grassroots. As they were witnessing this phenomenon, many revolutionaries attempted to recreate the conditions for intellectual leadership, by interacting within small circles of web activists, who would share the same political opinion. Yet this only emphasised the polarisation of the debate, making the opposition even more vulnerable.

## 7. Second empirical analysis: the 2012 presidential campaign on Google and Twitter

Studies investigating the role of social media in the 2011 Arab uprisings demonstrated that the contribution of Twitter or Facebook in facilitating the Egyptian and Tunisian protests was often overestimated. As argued earlier, studies considering the technological argument from a post-colonial and critical perspective suggested that cyber-activism mainly played a role in assisting the logistics of the revolutionary protests and drawing the attention of the international community. Yet very few studies have been conducted to evaluate how social media usage has evolved over the course of first parliamentary, presidential or constitutional campaigns following the uprisings.

In this chapter, I will explore how digital media contributed to *institutionalise* the revolutionary discourse in the particular context of the 2012 presidential race, which led to the election of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt. I will discuss how presidential candidates incorporated some of the communication strategies originally used by pro-revolutionary activists. Simultaneously, I will comment on the aspects of their political programme, which was advertised on social media and intended to respond to revolutionaries' demands. In doing so, I will demonstrate that social media campaigning assisted two out of the three leading presidential candidates in regaining legitimacy over the first round of the campaign, by *remediating* the revolutionary discourse (Bolter and Grusin, 2000).

Among the events that punctuated the post-revolutionary debate in Egypt, the 2012 presidential elections marked the return of parties and formal institutions on the political scene. Along with the parliamentary elections (2011), the presidential race provided political officials with the opportunity to position themselves with regards to pro-revolutionaries' demands. Most importantly, the event led them to debate the revolution from diverging ideological perspectives. Competing political camps offered different views on how the principles of freedom, social equity and dignity should be materialised in policymaking.

On one hand, militaries insisted on a particular interpretation of *freedom* and *social equity*, which intended to contrast with Islamists' political programme. In that respect, they presented themselves as the guardians of political stability and modernisation, by claiming to ensure gender equity and economic growth, while preventing sectarianism.

On the other hand, Islamists and moderate traditionalists advertised themselves as the only political group likely to implement significant political change. Their interpretation of freedom and justice – as in the title of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party – was considerably different from that of the militaries. *Justice* was to be made for the long-time repressed opposition against the former regime. Likewise, the peace treaty with Israel and the political alliances decided under Mubarak were to be renegotiated in the name of justice and in order to support neighbouring Arab states likely to support a more conservative legislation.

During the course of the presidential campaign, the vocabulary of the revolution has been endorsing very different meanings depending on the ideological context, in which it was used. This alone demonstrates how *fluid* the revolutionary discourse was. This determining moment may also have enhanced the polarisation of the political sphere, despite the success of the 2011 uprisings in gathering different social and generational groups.

In order to illustrate this phenomenon, I will make use of two visualisation tools to assess the visibility of the five leading presidential candidates online during the first round of the campaign. The first application, called R-Shief, allows visualising the popularity of the candidates on social media Twitter. The second one, Google Trends, provides an overview of the volume of searches computed on search engine Google.

I will briefly comment on these findings with the amount of occurrences found for the names of the five leading candidates in a sample of the Egyptian press extracted from the NexisLexis database. This will bring me to compare the visibility of the candidates online to their visibility on traditional media.

I will identify which of these candidates proved to be the most active on Twitter by listing the tweets released from their official Twitter accounts during the first round of the campaign. Finally, I will analyse the content of the tweets posted by the most proactive Twitter users, among the five leading candidate: Ahmad Shafiq and Hamdeen Sabahy.

### **7.1. Methods: mapping the visibility of presidential candidates online**

Drawing on the data collected from the R-Shief<sup>46</sup> open-source database, I will comment on the popularity of the 2012 leading presidential candidates, by assessing the frequency of five trending hashtags in the days that preceded the election (round 1).

I will then discuss these findings in relation to a study I conducted as part of a project on ESRC Google Data Analytics Programme<sup>47</sup>. This study examined Egyptian voters' use of the search engine Google over the course of the presidential campaign and discussed a set of data collected from the application *Google Trend*. This methodological tool enables us to visualize fluctuations of searches computed by Google users and allows us to compare the popularity of up to five different search terms over a definite period of time. In the context of the 2012 Egyptian elections, the data collected from Google Trends provide us with additional findings with regards to the visibility of presidential candidates online. As I will show, these results corroborate my findings on Twitter popular trends and hashtags, illustrating which political actors might have been the most active and successful in campaigning online.

I will briefly compare candidates' visibility in the press, by examining a sample of the Egyptian press, employing the NexisLexis database. Finally, I will conduct a discourse and thematic analysis of tweets posted by Ahmad Shafiq and Hamdeen Sabahy, who proved to be the most active Twitter users among the five leading candidates.

Google and Twitter are particularly appropriate sources of data for this study, as they encode user-generated content semantically. As such, they are very much representative of

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<sup>46</sup> <http://r-shief.org/>

<sup>47</sup> [www.voterecology.com](http://www.voterecology.com)

the characteristics of semantic web and enable to track and map users' activities and topic of interests. Most importantly, extracting data from these web services by applying visualisation tools such as *R-Shief* and *Google Trends* allows one to identify different and sometimes-conflicting interpretations of the same tag, hashtag or search term. The method is especially relevant when combining the findings of data visualisation tools with in depth qualitative analysis. This approach enables to assess the fluidity of a discourse circulating on social media, by outlining how media narratives might evolve over time or appeal to different audiences.

## **7.2. Introducing the first post-revolutionary presidential election in Egypt:**

Following the roadmap and the electoral laws promulgated by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), the 2012 presidential campaign took place between the 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> May (round 1) and 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> June 2012 (round 2).

In accordance with the conditions for candidates' nomination announced by the electoral committee on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 2012, future candidates were required to be supported by 30 members of the Parliament or 30,000 eligible voters. They were expected to have been Egyptians for at least two generations and to be born in Egypt. Citizens married to a foreigner or with another nationality were not eligible for presidential election. Candidates' registration officially took place between the 10<sup>th</sup> March and the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2012. On the 14<sup>th</sup> April 2012, the Supreme Presidential Electoral Commission (SPEC) disqualified ten people among the twenty-three candidates originally registered. Some of the most influential and controversial political leaders were removed from the presidential contest. Among them were the prominent figure of the Muslim Brotherhood Khairat El Shater, former intelligence chief of Mubarak's administration Omar Suleiman and popular Salafi leader Hazem Abou Ismail.

Although many candidates had been involved in the opposition against the former regime, they had also strong connections with the previous government and had completed most of their political career under Mubarak's administration.

Among the five leading candidates, independent liberal candidate Amru Mussa had served as minister of foreign affairs between 1991 and 2001 and represented Egypt as secretary general for the League of Arab states between 2001 and 2011. The candidate had also been appointed as permanent representative to the United Nations between 1990 and 1991.

Independent candidate Ahmad Shafiq had served under the former administration as Minister of Aviation from 2002 to 2011 and had previously operated the function of commander of the Air Force for six years. Ahmad Shafiq stood out as a supporter of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and was perceived by all the factions of the opposition as an agent of the military elite as well as the candidate of the counter-revolution.

Candidate of the *Freedom and Justice* party (Muslim Brotherhood) Mohammed Morsi as well as left-wing Nasserite Hamdeen Sabahy had been elected in 2000 to serve for five years as independent members of the Parliament.

Most revolutionaries as well as the community of bloggers and activists contested the validity of the presidential race, which had been entirely regulated by the military council. However there was agreement among members of the opposition that candidates Hamdeen Sabahi and Abdel Moneim Abu al Futuh were more likely to conform to the revolutionary agenda. (cf. *The Big Pharaoh*, 2012: Ref. 71;72; *Behhaya*, 2012: Ref. 23;24).

Both candidates had become leaders of the opposition, by mobilizing civilian movements for social equity and contesting acts of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood. As a co-founder of *Kefaya*<sup>48</sup> (*Egyptian Movement for Change*), Hamdeen Sabahi had publically

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<sup>48</sup> Kefaya is the unofficial label of the Egyptian Movement for Change, which had been active consolidating the opposition against former president Hosni Mubarak since 2004. The movement motivated protests and

condemned corruption and nepotism under Mubarak's government. He was involved in the former government as an independent member of the Parliament for ten years prior to the revolution, enabled to represent his own party - the *Al-Karama (Dignity)* party, which was only formally recognized in August 2011.

Abdel Moneim Abu al Futuh had become famous in the 1970s, after publically expressing his criticism to former president Anwar Sadat, claiming more legitimacy for the Muslim Brotherhood. The candidate was well known for his moderate position within the conservative wing, being considered as particularly progressive on issues relating to gender equity and to the Christian minority. Although he competed as an independent, he had been committed to the strongest organization within the opposition for his entire political career.

The five leaders Abdel Moneim Abu al Futuh, Ahmed Shafiq, Amru Mussa, Hamdeen Sabahy and Mohammed Morsi shared more than 90% of the votes in the first round of the elections. Commentators stated that the victory of the military candidate Ahmad Shafiq and representative of the Muslim Brotherhood Mohammed Morsi illustrated the polarisation of the Egyptian political environment and the leadership of two dominant groups: traditionalists and the military elites.

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grew as the backbone of the revolutionary opposition, gathering activists from different political orientations (Liberal, Leftist, Nasserist and Islamist).

**Table 12: Score of the 5 leading presidential candidates (Egypt, 2012)**

Leading candidates	Suffrage	Affiliations	Ideology
Mohammed Morsi	24.78%	Freedom and Justice Party	Muslim Brotherhood
Ahmad Shafiq	23.66%	Independent	Military
Hamdeen Sabahy	20.72%	Independent (founder of the Karama party)	Socialist, Nasserite
Abdel Moneim Abu al Futuh	17.47%	Independent (former member of the Muslim Brotherhood)	Moderate traditionalist
Amru Mussa	11.13%	Independent	Liberal

### 7.3. Democratizing the political debate or counter-discourse

Following the parliamentary election (November 2011 to January 2012), the presidential race appeared as the opportunity for parties and political leaders to reclaim influence over the public sphere, by drawing attention to their own political agenda.

Whereas activists had become the object of media's attention over the months that followed the revolutionary uprisings, officials running in the presidential election were now regarded as the main player in the media and political scene. I evidenced this phenomenon not only when analysing samples from the Egyptian blogosphere, but also by investigating the Egyptian case for the Voter Ecology ESRC research project.

This study explores Internet users' application of search engine Google in periods of elections. In order to compare voters' behaviour in different political environments, it uses the application Google Trends to identify recurrent search keywords relating to four cases of presidential or parliamentary elections held in UK, Egypt, Italy and the US. By doing so, it intends to detect which aspects of the campaign proved to have stimulated citizens' interest and whether these may be determined by mainstream media coverage.

By comparing a set of search keywords, the study revealed that Egyptian Google users were more likely to seek information on political officials over the period of the presidential campaign. Alternatively, activists, who used digital media as their main channel of communication and remained disconnected from any specific political organisation, had generated more searches prior to the election and over the period of the 2013 coup. But most importantly, this research highlighted the fact that news media shifted attention from grass-roots to institutional politics over the period of the 2012 presidential election.

Figure 10: Data visualisation computed on Google Trends (Voter Ecology Project, 2014)

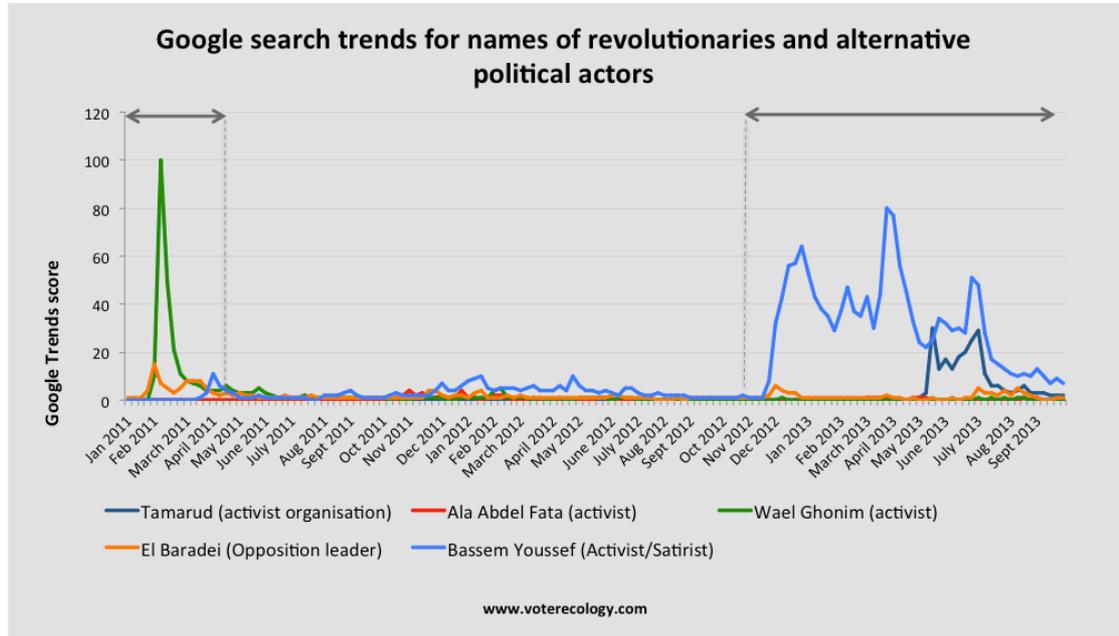
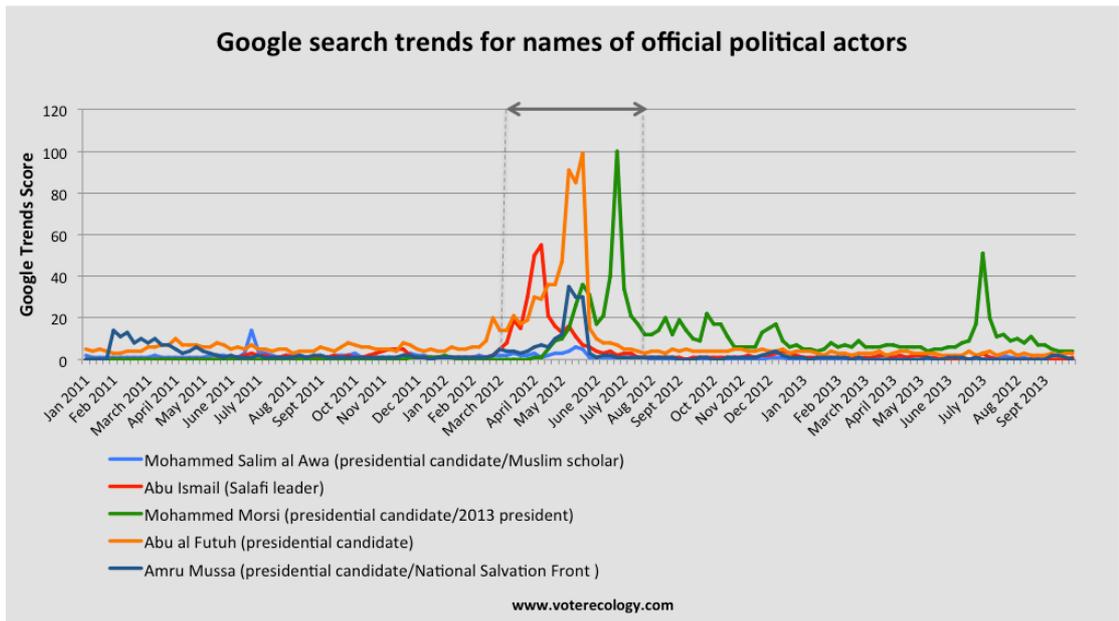


Figure 11: Data visualisation computed on Google Trends (Voter Ecology Project, 2014)



As illustrated above, the Egyptian case study compared the volume of searches computed on Google for two sets of political actors. The first category included individuals or associations of independent activists, who had played a significant part in mobilising the opposition between 2011 and 2013. The second group involved presidential candidates,

government officials or party representatives affiliated to leading political organisations, whose campaign was more likely to be relayed by traditional mass media.

Given that Google Trends can only be used to visualise fluctuations of search volume for a set of up to five keywords, the scale of searches (Google Trend Score) would often vary depending on the selection of keywords computed. In addition, the application would only operate comparisons of keywords, provided that the search terms in question stimulated a substantial amount of searches. Yet, amongst the large number of names originally listed in each of these categories, only a very few proved to have generated a significantly high volume of searches. Consequently, the selection of keywords computed in this study is only representative of the most popular names in terms of Google searches.

This method however outlines the level of exposure of different types of political actors over the months that followed the uprisings, suggesting that the 2012 campaign contributed to bring the revolution into the sphere of institutional politics.

Yet beyond acknowledging the fact that the 2012 presidential debate unleashed the process of institutionalisation of the revolution, one needs to understand how the revolutionary counter-discourse operated this translation. To this end, this chapter explores how political officials applied interactive platforms such as Twitter to respond to or *remediate* the revolutionary discourse, and how this contributed to disseminate diverging interpretation of the revolution.

#### **7.4. Demystifying the role of Twitter and social media in the Egyptian revolution:**

According to a report published by Dubai School of Government (Salem and Mourtada, 2011), Egypt was among the top five Arab countries in terms of number of Twitter users, along with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. However, Egypt's Twitter penetration appears to be considerably low, with a 0.15 average penetration rate between January and March 2011:

Egypt particularly stands out, with one of the lowest Twitter user penetration rates in the region, especially given that the country has close to 7 million Facebook users and 17-18 million Internet users. There are two possible reasons for this. The first is that the distribution of Twitter users in Egypt is primarily concentrated in Cairo (51% of Twitter users), followed by Alexandria (8% of Twitter users) (...) This concentration of Twitter users in Cairo indicates that Twitter usage has not really caught on outside the capital. The second possible factor could be that Twitter has not yet offered an Arabic interface (initially scheduled for the first quarter of 2011). (Salem and Mourtada, 2011: 24)

This observation had been confirmed to me by most of the participants I met during my fieldwork. When reflecting on the role of social media in the first post-revolutionary elections, Nabil, a young candidate to the 2015 Parliamentary election, argued that Facebook and Twitter had no significant impact on the votes. In his views, social media mainly remained a feature of revolutionary activism, whereas the presidential campaign had reintroduced an old fashioned kind of retail politics, bringing political leaders to interact directly with the electorate on the field:

(...) I mean social media started the whole people fire, but it was now moving on the ground, which really started to extinguish the fire a little bit. And if I want to take political campaign as an example, I guess I would take something like the Shafiq campaign. I mean yea, they were present in social media because everybody had to. Shafiq, Morsi, Abu al Futuh and all these guys and everybody had the social media presence, because they had to have it, but it was really ground work that distinguish between both and the areas, where they had the most fierce battles, like Shafiq had in Delta or Morsi had in Upper Egypt – those are not really internet-affluent voters motivated by Twitter or Facebook type of voters. It was, I mean, the anti-revolution did exactly the opposite, by taking the battle out of Facebook rather than onto Facebook and Twitter. (...) I'll give you an example. There is (...) an icon of social media so to speak, Mahmoud Salem, Sandmonkey<sup>49</sup>, at the time 45,000 followers on Twitter, ran for Parliament in Heliopolis, got 5, 000 votes! In an area, where most of the population is affluent, I would say the Internet penetration would be at the higher end of where it would be anywhere it would be in Egypt (...) (Nabil, cf. Interview Transcripts: 46)

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<sup>49</sup> Famous Egyptian activist, active on social media under the pseudonym "Sandmonkey"

Egyptian Twitter users, however, do appear to be active in commenting on the political crisis. For example, #egypt and #jan25 launched to report on the 2011 uprisings proved to be the most popular trending hashtags across the Arab region (Salim and Mourtada, 2011: 16). In addition, the study conducted by the Dubai School of Government indicate that a higher volume of tweets was published in periods of political crises (2011: 20). Although Twitter has only been accessible to a minority of the population, it proves to be specifically used as a tool for campaigning and political activism. For this reason the role of Twitter in the 2012 presidential debate should be analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Despite its low penetration rate and the issue of digital divide, this social platform provides an insight into the Egyptian political debate. It outlines some of the controversies that have been discussed on social media over the course of the presidential campaign and helps in understanding, which political camp had been more visible online. As such, it enables me to demonstrate to what extent social media benefitted from the counter-revolution, although it was initially regarded as an incubator for political resistance.

## 7.5. Egyptian Twitter users and 2012 presidential race:

**Table 13: Description of the data sample extracted from the R-Shief data base**

Candidates	#hashtag	Tweets archived in the R-Shief data base			
		Number of tweets	days collected	Start date	End date
Abu al Futuh	#ابوالفتوح	81991	423	14.04.12	11.06.13
	#حمدين	141342	395	12.05.12	06.11.13
Hamdeen Sabahy	#صباحي	113630	396	11.05.12	11.06.13
	#موسي	3157356	396	11.05.12	11.06.13
Mohammed Morsi	#موسي_الاستين	2447	422	15.04.12	11.06.13
Amru Mussa	#موسى	49259	396	11.05.12	11.06.13
Ahmad Shafiq	#شفيقة	703354	341	01.05.12	07.04.13

R-Shief is an open-source project, which provides free access to a database of tweets posted in English and Arabic between 2008 and 2013. The website is also developing a set of data visualisation tools designed to conduct social media analysis in Arabic. The table

above lists all hashtags mentioning the five leading candidates, which have been archived in the R-Shief database.

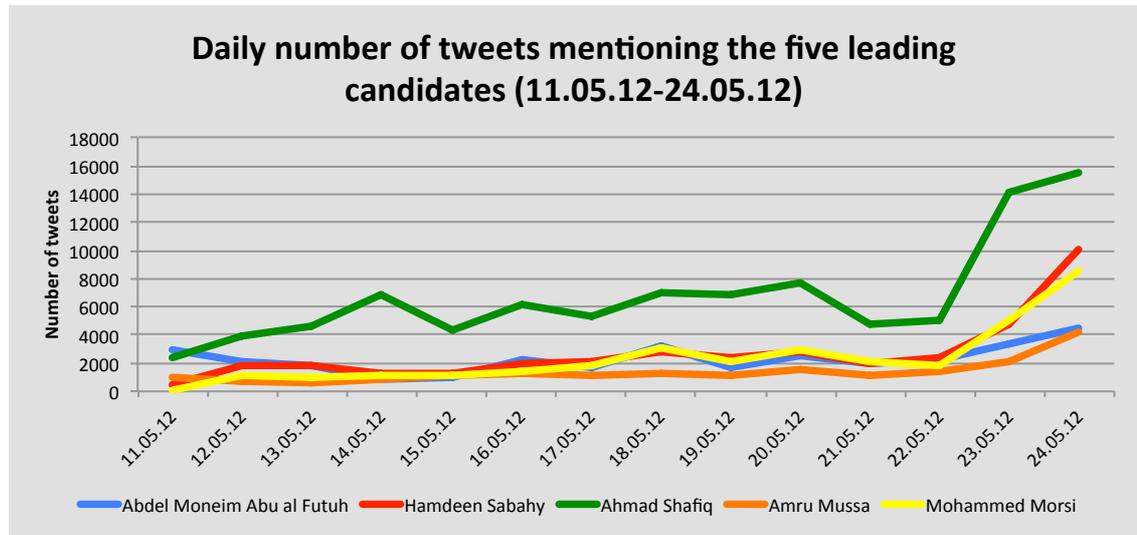
As it appears, two sets of hashtags respectively refer to candidates Hamdeen Sabahy and Mohammed Morsi. Given that the first date of the archive vary depending on Twitter hashtag, I considered variations of tweets between 11<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> May 2012, so as to compare all tags listed in the table above.

**Table 14: Visibility of the candidates across the Twitter data set**

Tweets mentioning the five leading candidates between 11.05.2012 and 24.05.2012					
Trending hashtags referring to candidates	Hamdeen Sabahy #حمدين صباحي	Ahmad Shafiq #شفيق	Mohammed Morsi #مورسي #مورسي-الاستين	Amru Mussa #موسى	Abdel Moneim Abu al Futuh #ابوالفتوح
Minimum amount of tweets in a day	466	2,395	74	611	851
Maximum amount of tweets in a day	10,085	15,492	8,484	4,181	4,529
Total amount of tweets	38,080	94,669	33,179	19,589	32,287
Average of tweets	2,720	6,762	2,370	1,399	2,306

The sample collected indicated that Ahmad Shafiq gained more visibility on Twitter than his opponents, with a significantly higher average and total amount of tweets. Additionally, as it appears on the graph below, the number of tweets referring to Mohammed Morsi and Hamdeen Sabahy considerably increased during the three days that preceded the election. However, despite the success of Mohammed Morsi's campaign, the name of Hamdeen Sabahy slightly prevails in terms of visibility on Twitter. The data exported from R-Shief revealed a decrease of tweets in relation to candidate Abu al Futuh, which correlates with the date of the presidential TV debate, featuring Abu al Futuh and Amru Mussa, on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

Figure 12: Visibility of the 5 leading candidates across the Twitter data set



These findings coincide with Laila Shareen Sakr's study (2012)<sup>50</sup>, which applies R-Shief sentiment analysis' tools to investigate a broader set of hashtags reporting the 2012 campaign. Among all Twitter occurrences found for the names of the presidential candidates, this computerised sentiment analysis identified the tweets, in which political leaders were referred to in positive terms. Whereas the number of occurrences associated with the name of a candidate highlights his visibility on Twitter, the percentage of positive sentiment indicates the quality of his reputation.

The sentiment analysis computed by Sakr (2012) demonstrated that candidates Hamdeen Sabahy, Mohammed Morsi and Khaled Ali reached a higher percentage of positive sentiment associated with their names than Ahmad Shafiq. However, the number of occurrences for the name of Ahmad Shafiq was considerably higher than for the names of his opponents.

Mentions of Ahmad Shafiq represented 41.51% of the sample, whereas other candidates were referred to by approximately 7% to 13% of the tweets included in this data set. This

<sup>50</sup> It can be retrieved from: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5716/egypts-presidential-elections-and-twitter-talk>

undeniably leads us to think that Shafiq’s campaign was significantly more visible on Twitter.

**Table 15: Findings of the Sentiment Analysis computed by Laila Shereen Sakr (2012)**

<b>Sentiment Analysis conducted on a sample of Arabic Hashtags covering the campaign (May 2012) (Laila Shereen Sakr, 2012)</b>						
Arabic hashtags for names of candidates	<i>Shafiq</i> [Ahmad Shafiq]	<i>Hamdeen</i> [Hamdeen Sabahy]	<i>AbouFotouh</i> [Abu al Moneim Abu al Futuh]	<i>Moussa</i> [Amru Mussa]	<i>Morsi</i> [Mohammed Morsi]	<i>KhaledAli</i> [Khaled Ali]
Percentage of positive sentiment	77.66%	84.84%	72.6%	69.05%	99.83%	93.49%
Percentage of the sample	41.51%	11.4%	13.53%	8.53%	11.74%	7.34%
Daily Tweet Volume	7460	3912	2457	2978	3128	1171
Votes – election round 1	23.66%	20.72%	17.47%	11.13%	24.78%	0.58%

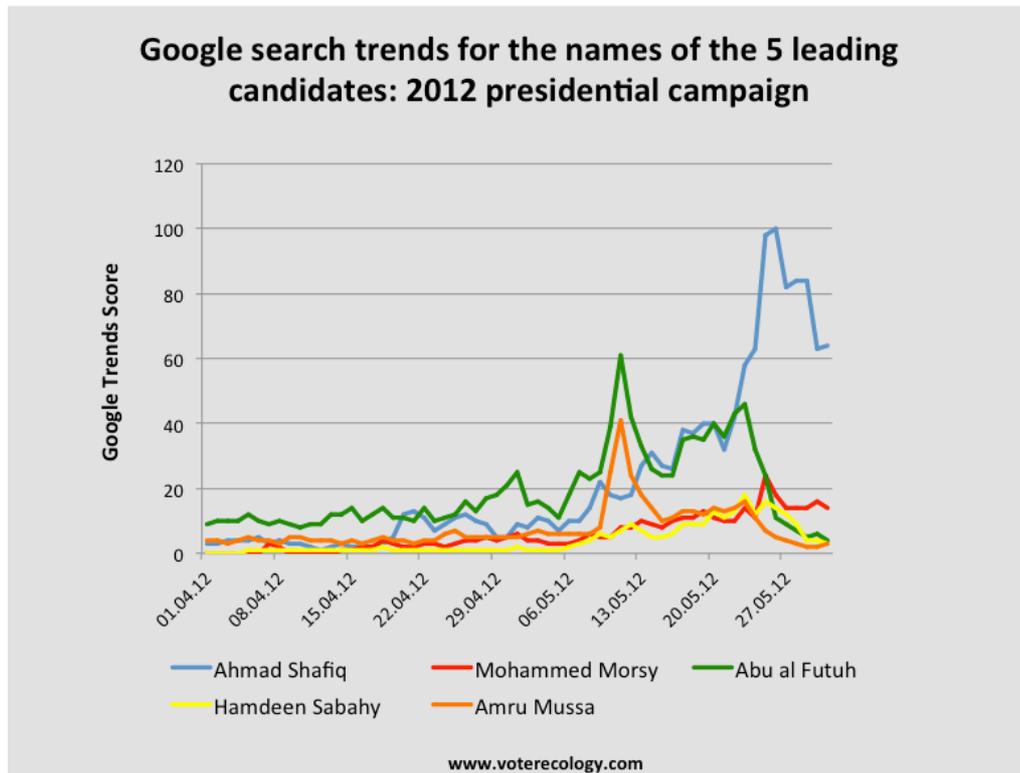
Source: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5716/egypts-presidential-elections-and-twitter-talk>

### 7.6. Candidates’ visibility across the media: Google searches and the Egyptian press

Given Twitter’s relatively low penetration rate, these findings should be discussed by examining candidates’ visibility across different communication channels.

In this regard, the study I produced for the ESRC comparative research project (above) contributes to assess candidates’ visibility across the web. For the purpose of this study, I employed the application “Google Trends” to compare frequencies of searches computed by Egyptian Google users for the names of the five leading candidates and over the period of the 2012 election campaign. Similarly to Shareen Sakr’s (2012) study, this research revealed that candidate Ahmad Shafiq stimulated a constant increase of interest among the community of Egyptian Google users, which was not the case for Mohammed Morsi. This suggests that the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood was not as visible online during the first round of the presidential race.

**Figure 13: Popularity of the 5 leading candidates in terms of Google Searches (Voter Ecology Project, 2014)**



Twitter campaigning strategies can also be examined in the context of the wider media ecology, and specifically in relation to traditional mass media. For that purpose, I identified occurrences for the names of the five leading candidates across a selection of Egyptian news articles archived on the NexisLexis database<sup>51</sup>. As it appears in the table below, the amount of references listed seems to prefigure the success of Ahmad Shafiq and Mohammed Morsi in the first round of the election. Most importantly, this indicates that candidate Morsi was more visible offline and that his campaign was actively relayed by the press.

<sup>51</sup> The selection included 37 Egyptian newspapers dedicated to general and political news. Among the sources selected and available on the NexisLexis database, four newspapers proved to have constantly reported the campaign: Al Messa (Arabic), Al-Ahram, Al-Ahram Gate (Arabic), Al Gomhurriah (Arabic).

**Table 16: Visibility of the 5 leading presidential candidates across the NexisLexis news data set**

<b>Visibility of political leaders in the Egyptian Press 1 March-22 May 2012 (first round of presidential campaign)</b>		
<i>Names</i>	<i>Number of occurrences</i>	<i>% Occurrences among political leaders considered</i>
"Ahmad Shafiq"	550	24.8
"Mohammed Morsi"	506	22.8
"Hamdeen Sabahy"	279	12.6
"Abu al Futuh"	493	22.2
"Amru Mussa"	213	9.6
"Hazem Salah Abu Ismail"	177	8

*Data collected from a selection of 37 Egyptian periodic newspapers archived in the NexisLexis database*

### 7.7. Candidates campaigning on Twitter

**Table 17: Inventory of the presidential candidates Twitter accounts (2012 presidential campaign)**

Candidate	Twitter account	Date of first tweet	Number of tweets*	Daily tweet average*	Number of days**	Number of Tweets posted**	Daily tweet average**
Ahmad Shafiq	AhmadShafikEG	18.05.12	93	10.24	36	93	2.58
Amru Mussa	moussacampaign	25.06.11	205	22.58	334	606	1.81
Hamdeen Sabahy	HamdeenSabahy	08.06.10	39	4.29	716	240	0.34
Abu al Futuh	MaadiCampaign	05.04.12	150	16.52	49	150	3.06

*\*During first round of the presidential campaign (01.04.12-23.05.12)*  
*\*\*Between the date of the first tweet and round 1 of the election (23.05.2012)*

Besides quantifying candidates' visibility and popularity among Twitter users, it is worth examining how political leaders attempted to use this medium to promote their political programme. For this purpose, I conducted a discourse and thematic analysis of a sample of tweets posted on candidates' official Twitter accounts.

As shown on the table above, only four of the five leading candidates had been actively campaigning on Twitter over the months that preceded the first round of the presidential race. No official Twitter account was administered on behalf of Mohammed Morsi prior to his election in June 2012. This can partly be explained by the fact that, as the representative of the Muslim Brotherhood, his campaign was already successfully relayed online and offline by the Freedom and Justice party.

Whereas Morsi benefitted from the profile afforded by the network and infrastructure of his party, independent candidates were relying to a greater extent on social media's facilitation of more direct engagement with their potential electorate.

Some of the participants I interacted with on the field corroborated this idea. As she was contemplating the way in which various political agendas began to circulate via Twitter in the aftermath of the uprisings, young liberal journalist Samira raised the fact that candidate Morsi was essentially relying on the campaigning strategy of his party:

(...) let me tell you something about Morsi is that he was considered as the Muslim Brotherhood candidate so the Muslim Brotherhood, they had their own Twitter account and they would promote Morsi, regardless of whether he has his own Twitter account or not. And that also discredited him in a way. (...) so he was not even considered an individual candidate for himself, so he was considered just the Muslim Brotherhood pantomime that is used, exactly. Because, you know the other person from the Brotherhood, who were supposed to be running was Khairat al Shater<sup>52</sup>, who was more, you know, I'd say he was stronger within the organisation himself. (...) I should mention also the Salafies, like Abu Ismail, they had a lot of supporters, (...) were very vocal and had Twitter account that were very famous (...) I am talking about Twitter but also, all of that applies to Facebook of course, as well. Because that, it's a different audience of course, you have to know, Facebook is more, reached the more traditional, general population, while Twitter the younger, tech-savvy, I know it's all cliché but I guess it's true, not only on Facebook but I guess for Twitter. (Samira, cf. Interview Transcripts: 27)

Among the four Twitter accounts included in my sample, Amru Mussa's moussacampaign and Abu al Futuh's MaadiCampaign produced a larger amount of tweets between April and May 2012. Besides, Amru Mussa's Twitter campaign had generated the highest number of tweets since its creation in June 2011. However, these social media profiles essentially highlighted public events and directed the audience to additional sources of information, by providing links to news articles, YouTube footages and Facebook pages. These accounts were not administered by the candidates themselves and were not meant to develop personalised interactions with Twitter users.

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<sup>52</sup> Leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood

**Table 18: Inventory of unofficial Twitter accounts excluded from the data set**

Twitter accounts excluded from data sample		
Candidates	Twitter accounts	Irrelevancy
Abdel Moneim Abu al Futuh	DrAbolftoh_alex	<i>Administered by supporters from Alexandria</i>
Abdel Moneim Abu al Futuh	DrAbolfotoh	<i>Only active after the presidential election</i>
Mohammed Morsi	MorsiMorsy	<i>Only active after the presidential election</i>
Mohammed Morsi	Morse_egy	<i>Only active after the presidential election</i>
Amru Mussa	AmreMoussaPR	<i>Only active after the presidential election</i>
Amru Mussa	Amroomoosa	<i>Unofficial account</i>
Hamdeen Sabahy	SabahyCampaign	<i>Only active after the presidential election</i>
Hamdeen Sabahy	hamdinsabahy	<i>Only active on 21.08.2011   Limited amount of tweets</i>

Alternatively, Ahmad Shafiq and Hamdeen Sabahy's tweets relayed candidates' personal statements. Hamdeen Sabahy consistently applied the first person in his tweets. This was not always the case for the AhmadShafikEG account, which mostly quoted statements from Ahmad Shafiq's public speeches and interviews.

Yet unlike their opponents, Shafiq and Sabahy developed a particular *Twitter communication strategy*. Their posts revealed an attempt at developing a more conversational form of interaction with the electorate. The two candidates developed a more informal form of communication, which was that of the technologically literate middle class. As such, it targeted the same audience as digital activists.

Among the 93 tweets produced by *AhmadShafikEG*, many statements extracted from presidential rally events promoted the inclusion and representativeness of women and the Christian minority into the future Egyptian government.

This confirms a hypothesis formulated by local citizen journalists<sup>53</sup> (The Big Pharaoh, 2012: Ref. 71) according to which Ahmad Shafiq had been strategically portrayed as an alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, by advocating the integration of religious minorities as well as women's involvement in politics, the candidate positioned himself along opposite ideological lines to the Muslim Brotherhood. In this regard, his Twitter

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.bigpharaoh.org/2012/05/22/whos-who-in-egypts-presidential-elections/>

campaign emphasised his engagement against sectarianism, by reporting his participation to the conference entitled “Egyptian Women and the President”, which was organised by the National Council for Women on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 2012. Additionally, Shafiq’s Twitter campaign covered his visits to Coptic churches in Egyptian provinces.

Another aspect of Ahmad Shafiq’s political discourse and electoral programme, which was highlighted by his Twitter campaign, lies in the argument of national security. As the candidate of the counter-revolution, Ahmad Shafiq promoted himself as the only potential president able to restore political stability. This distinguished him from Abu al Futuh, and Hamdeen Sabahy, who publically contested the authority of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF).

Unlike his opponents, Ahmad Shafiq called for citizens’ trust in the military council and argued that the SCAF’s involvement in electoral regulations and infrastructure would not affect the democratic process. Admittedly, this argument – along with his military career and involvement in Mubarak’s former administration - characterised him as the partisan of the military regime. Therefore, it is very unlikely that this particular aspect of his discourse contributed to convince the Egyptian voters, who had celebrated the removal of Mubarak’s dictatorship.

However, a closer analysis of the campaign indicates that Ahmad Shafiq’s position was advertised as an opportunity to restore stable political institutions and national security. Whereas candidates Sabahy, Abu al Futuh and Mohammed Morsi agreed on the need to review the peace treaty with Israel, Shafiq’s Twitter campaign reported his visit to Nag Hammadi – in which several Copts were massacred on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2010- advocating peaceful and strategic relationships with the United States, neighbouring Arab countries and the gulf region. In this case again, his political programme differentiated him from the revolutionaries and the Muslim Brotherhood, from which Egyptian citizens expected a renegotiation of these political alliances.

These aspects of Ahmad Shafiq's political programme show through his use of Twitter during the presidential race, evidencing an efficient and successful Twitter communication strategy. Not only did the social media cover daily official visits and presidential rally events of the campaign, but it also provided the audience with an overview of the candidate's electoral programme. Indeed, after addressing issues of gender equity and women's right, AhmadShafikEg reported Shafiq's economic plan in response to youth unemployment and industrial development. Tweets posted between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> May referred to his projects of industrialisation of the Suez canal region and his intention of democratising education and supporting young entrepreneurs, creating more professional perspectives for the post-Mubarak generation.

Simultaneously, despite his attempt at restoring trust in the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, Shafiq expressed his will to establish an office in charge of monitoring corruption as well as an office for democratic development. By addressing the topics of corruption, democratic development and youth unemployment on Twitter and by highlighting them as a major part of his political programme, Shafiq responded to some of the most consistent demands raised by revolutionaries.

Therefore, although he distinguished himself as the candidate of the counter-revolution and despite his partnership with the military council, Ahmad Shafiq's discourse resonated some of the demands raised by young liberals and revolutionaries. Egyptian bloggers, who reported and deconstructed candidates' campaign in relation to the revolutionaries' agenda, offered different interpretations to the success of Shafiq's campaign, highlighting the fact that he benefitted from more financial resources than his opponents. Another argument precisely lies in Shafiq's ability to answer to liberals' concerns regarding the increasing popularity of religious parties and to mirror revolutionaries' demands.

However, these aspects of his political programme stand out from our Twitter data set, inasmuch as it characterises Ahmad Shafiq's entire campaign. In this regard, the AhmadShafikEg Twitter account was used to amplify a discourse that had been initially

framed by campaigners, rather than as a complementary and straightforward communication channel between the candidate and his electorate.

### **7.8. Mapping Hamdeen Sabahy's Twitter discourse**

In contrast, Hamdeen Sabahy's tweets offered complementary statements and provided his followers with exclusive reactions to everyday news. Unlike his opponents, Hamdeen Sabahy did not use Twitter to report the highlights of his presidential campaign, but positioned himself amongst regular Twitter users by posting personalised comments on the most topical issues.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012, Sabahy expressed his supports to the workers, who protested on April 2<sup>nd</sup> in front of the state Council to contest the government's decision to regain the companies of Ghazl Shebeen, Tanta for Linen, El Nasr for Steam Boilers and El-Nil for cotton Ginning to the public sector. On the 11<sup>th</sup> April 2012, Sabahy paid tribute to the Algerian revolutionary socialist Ahmad Ben Bella, who died on the same date, referring to him as a leading figure of the mobilisation for *freedom* and *social equity*. On the 19<sup>th</sup> April, the candidate reacted to Sheikh Ali Goma's controversial visit to the Al-Asqa Mosque in support of the Muslim community of Jerusalem, calling for the resignation of the Al-Azhar scholar. On the 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012, he expressed his condolences to candidate Ahmad Shafiq for the loss of his wife. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> May, he contested the arrest of the Egyptian citizen Ahmed Al-Gizawy in Saudi Arabia, which had led to several protests in Cairo. On the 7<sup>th</sup> May, Hamdeen Sabahy celebrates the election of socialist candidate François Hollande in France. Finally, on the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012, he refers to the death of former Egyptian Prime Minister and member of Gamal Abdel Nasser's administration Zakaria Mohieddin.

By shaping his postings more immediately around everyday news, Hamdeen Sabahy affords a certain currency to his political message, adopting the same perspective as his audience. Inevitably, this brings him to articulate his political campaign in relation to the

controversies that punctuate the presidential debate in a way that reflects pro-revolutionaries' application of social media.

His ability to communicate to the pro-revolutionary youth does not only manifest itself in the style of his tweets but also in the issues he raises from his Twitter account. Over the first round of the campaign, Sabahy continuously pays tribute to the martyrs of the revolution and expresses his support to activists protesting in front of the Ministry of Defence. He calls for the right of the youth opposition to protest peacefully, naming military authorities responsible for their safety. He recurrently formulates scepticism regarding the way traditional mass media have been reporting the campaign, which coincides with one of the most important criticisms of the revolutionary opposition. For these reasons, Hamdeen Sabahy clearly stands out as the only candidate, who applied social media and referred to the ideological vocabulary of the revolution in a way that is representative of pro-revolutionary activism.

In fact, the analysis I conducted on a sample of the activist blogosphere (Chapter 6) revealed that many of the bloggers, who remained critical about the evolution of the presidential debate, supported Sabahy's campaign. Candidate Abdel Moneim Abu al Futuh was also celebrated among the activist community for attempting at reconciling liberals and conservatives (cf. *The Big Pharaoh*, 2012: Ref. 71;72; *Behhaya*, 2012: Ref. 23;24).

Nevertheless bloggers covering the presidential race remained unsatisfied with the way most candidates responded to the claims of the revolution. As argued in my previous chapter, they contested the way military supporters and Islamist parties competed for different interpretations of the revolutionary discourse, so as to increase polarisation and discredit the left-wing and liberal opposition. Unlike his opponents, Sabahy echoed the revolutionary discourse through his Twitter campaign, by publically contesting the partiality of the media and the involvement the SCAF in the electoral process.

### **7.9. From Shafiq to Sabahy: revolution and counter-revolution intertwined**

In conclusion, analysing Twitter both quantitatively and qualitatively shows that among the top five candidates competing in the 2012 presidential race, Ahmad Shafiq and Hamdeen Sabahy were more active and popular on social media. The sample of tweets collected from the R-Shief database suggests that the two candidates have been the subjects of a significantly larger number of tweets than their opponents.

The sentiment analysis computed by Laila Shereen Sakr (2012) as well as the volume of tweets mentioning the names of the five political leaders both suggest that Mohammed Morsi's Twitter popularity also increased in the days that preceded the election. However, the former Egyptian president did not reach as much Twitter visibility as candidates Shafiq and Sabahy, presumably due to the fact that Morsi's campaign did not primarily rely on social media and digital communication tools. Visualising the evolution of Google searches for the names of the candidates confirms this hypothesis, as Mohammed Morsi did not stimulate as many Google searches as Ahmad Shafiq. On the other hand, the sample of Egyptian news articles collected from my NexisLexis corpus included a large number of references to the representative of the Muslim Brotherhood. Consequently, the success of Mohammed Morsi's campaign is more likely to be explained by his exposure in the press and in broadcast media.

Alternatively, the significant visibility of Ahmad Shafiq and Hamdeen Sabahy on Twitter reveals the desire to interact with a specific demographic. Indeed, developing a Twitter campaigning strategy gave them access to a range of internet-affluent voters among the middle class, who were less likely to support conservative parties. Yet this audience – more specifically the younger generation - was also very concerned with the need to materialise the revolutionary discourse. It is precisely the reason why their tweets are formulated as an attempt to respond to the revolutionary claims.

However, from an ideological perspective, Shafiq and Sabahy appear to be entirely different. Whereas Hamdeen Sabahy embraces revolutionary demands and presents

himself as an opportunity to *institute* them through his own political programme, Shafiq strategically distorts them to focus on the conflict between tradition and modernity. By doing so, he conveys the idea that military power remains the only way to prevent the success of the Muslim Brotherhood and capitalises on the fear of seeing the popularity of Islamists growing.

### **7.10. Conclusion to empirical analysis 2: fluidity of the revolutionary vocabulary**

These findings illustrate how the tools as well as the ideological vocabulary of the revolution had been employed to serve different political agenda. Like most of the quantitative studies quoted above have shown, it is very unlikely that Twitter in itself, along with the entire social media sphere, played an important role in the outcome of the presidential campaign. The fact that the most visible and popular<sup>54</sup> Twitter campaigners were among the top three candidates would rather suggest that they benefitted from a strong infrastructure and a successful campaigning strategy overall (online and offline). However, social media usage at the time of the campaign is revealing of the process of institutionalisation – hence alienation – of the revolution that operated in the entire political landscape.

This phenomenon can also be observed when looking at the relationship between traditional and digital media. For instance, the analysis I computed on Google Trends suggested that Google searches were very likely to be determined by traditional mass media coverage. For example, I observed that most of the names of activists and opposition movements that had generated significant search peaks (cf. figure 2, page 4) had been mentioned in the press and on national TV channels.

Among them was the famous satirist and TV host Bassem Youssef and the former head of the Middle Eastern branch of Google Wael Ghonim, who had become famous after being

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<sup>54</sup> By mentioning the popularity of the candidates I refer to Laila Shereen Sakr's (2012) sentiment analysis of all the Arabic tweets produced over the course of the campaign and more specifically to the high level of positive sentiments associated to Mohammed Morsi.

interviewed on the Dream TV channel in the aftermath of the uprisings. Like many other activists, who progressively became involved in a more institutional form of politics, Wael Ghonim started to publically express his support to candidate Abu al Futuh, by actively taking part in the campaign. Parties and presidential candidates attempted to regain legitimacy and sought the support of those who had become prominent figures of the revolution. Yet in doing so, they inevitably operated a distortion of the revolution, as it was originally conceived by revolutionary leaders and the grassroots.

## 8. Third empirical analysis: the 2012 constitutional debate

As argued in the first empirical analysis (chapter 6), analysing the revolutionary blogosphere between the 2011 uprisings and the 2013 coup outlined the fact that the opposition had become highly polarised. Left wing, liberals, secularists and Islamists would now compete for a different narrative of the revolution, which had made the entire revolutionary discourse *fluid* and inconsistent.

This had been emphasised by the 2012 presidential election, as parties and political leaders incorporated the revolutionary discourse to label their political agenda as the legitimate answer to revolutionaries' demands. This clearly stood out when analysing candidates' Twitter campaigning strategy. Despite the fact that social media might have been primarily applied by the Islamist and left-wing opposition to circumvent the traditional media blackout, it was now used to serve the interests of the counter-revolution.

With regards to my first research question, this demonstrated that the momentum of the revolution was highly likely to be hijacked by the leading political forces. Consequently, when it comes to visualising the cycle of discourse as it applies to the case of the Egyptian uprisings, it could easily be argued that the 2012 presidential race constituted the first stage of the process through which the revolution became institutionalised.

Following the 2012 presidential election, the first constitutional referendum raised further concerns on how to implement the changes requested by revolutionaries and involve citizens in future policymaking. Yet despite the fact that the referendum was administrated by the first democratically elected government, it revealed deep conflicts of interests between the new elite and the judicial administration.

Most importantly, the constitutional debate revealed a lack of consensus with regards to the way citizens had envisioned some of the revolutionary ideals and their applications. As it appeared from the ethnography I conducted in the field, a broader range of citizens among the middle class, who were initially not involved in politics, were now publically expressing their views via digital media. As the public debate progressively involved a

broader diversity of recently politicised actors, one could now see how different interpretations of the concepts - that had generated a high level of social cohesion during the revolution - would take shape.

*Social equity, dignity and freedom* would now be addressed on the basis of different ideological frameworks, which only highlighted the polarisation of the political environment. Simultaneously, the term “democracy” was to be redefined in relation with the Islamic concept of *Shura*, as the Egyptian people further debated on how to potentially reconcile tradition and modernity.

In this chapter, I will set the context in which the 2012 constitutional referendum took place and demonstrate that this event announced a new stage in the cycle that led the revolution to the rise of the counter-revolution. For this purpose, I will rely on a thematic analysis I conducted on a sample of the Dostour Sharek e-deliberation platform as well as on interviews conducted with two key actors involved in the constitutional campaign. I will show that the constitutional debate occurred in a heavily polarised environment, which created further confusion with regards to the original meaning of the revolution.

Additionally, on the basis of the Dostour Sharek case study, I will comment on the way Egyptian citizens have experienced online forms of deliberation. Whereas most of the literature has approached this question from the perspective of Habermas’ public sphere (Cardon, 2010; Flichy, 2010), I will focus on whether such deliberative practices can efficiently lead to a consensus. For this purpose, I will compare the level of *interactivity* - an indicator commonly applied in the literature on e-governance - with what I will define as the level of *intertextuality* of citizens’ comments. By doing so, I will argue that the Egyptian post-revolutionary debate is indicative of the fact that the 2011 uprisings might have relied on an illusion of consensus.

## 8.1. Setting the context of the 2012 constitutional debate

**Table 19: Events surrounding the 2012 constitutional debate**

<b>Chronology of the Events surrounding the 2012 Egyptian constitutional referendum</b>	
13 <sup>th</sup> Feb 2011	2011 Parliament is dissolved
19 <sup>th</sup> March 2011	First referendum on constitutional amendments set by the military authorities
Nov 2011-Jan 2012	2011 Parliamentary elections
Jan 2012	House of Representatives nominated 100 of its members to constitute the first Constituent Assembly
10 <sup>th</sup> Apr 2012	First Constituent Assembly is dissolved by Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) under the pressure of liberal and non-Islamist groups
7 <sup>th</sup> June 2012	Representatives of 22 parties and military council reach agreement: New Constituent Assembly is formed
14 <sup>th</sup> June 2012	Dissolution of the House of Representatives by the SCAF, after court ruling decrees Parliamentary election are unconstitutional
17 <sup>th</sup> June 2012	Military council issues a new decree to the provisional constitutional draft allowing the SCAF to dissolve the assembly in case it encounters difficulties and fail at completing its task
26 June 2012	First session of the Constituent Assembly: subcommittees are formed to address different chapters of the constitution
Mid-July 2012	6 members of the Egyptian bloc parties (the liberal coalition) resigned
11 <sup>th</sup> Aug 2012	Constitutional draft articles are posted on the “Dostour Sharek” e-consultation platform
Sep 2012	Left-wing and liberal members progressively withdraw from the Constituent Assembly and call for a boycott
10 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2012	Constituent assembly launches the “Know your constitution” campaign
23 <sup>rd</sup> Oct 2012	Administrative court announces that a decision will be taken regarding the legitimacy of the Constituent Assembly within 45 days. Islamist parties celebrate the fact that this delay enables the Constituent Assembly to complete the constitutional draft and submit it to referendum.
22 <sup>nd</sup> Nov 2012	Mohammed Morsi issues controversial decree granting him unlimited powers

**Chronology of the Events surrounding the 2012 Egyptian constitutional referendum**

29 <sup>th</sup> Nov 2012	Last meeting of the constituent Assembly (article 2 establishing the Sharia as the basis for Egyptian law with only 83 members being present and with most of liberal and Christian representatives being absent)
1 <sup>st</sup> Dec 2012	Last changes incorporated into the constitutional draft: 803 draft articles have been produced over the drafting process.
3 <sup>rd</sup> Dec 2012	Judges of the Supreme Constitutional Court announce that they will not oversee the referendum to protest against Mohammed Morsi controversial decree
5 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2012	Violent clashes between members of the Muslim Brotherhood and opponents in front of presidential palace
8 <sup>th</sup> & 11 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2012	Egyptians living abroad vote on the 2012 constitutional draft
15 <sup>th</sup> Dec 2012	First round of the constitutional referendum. Constitution is accepted with 63.96% of votes and 34% of election turnout

The first constituent assembly was elected by the Parliament in March 2012 and dissolved in April 2012, after Civil parties' members massively withdrew, calling for a boycott of the new constitution. Liberals, left-wing and secularist parties, that formed the opposition against the Islamist majority claimed that the panel was unconstitutional and failed at representing Egyptian youth and minorities<sup>55</sup>.

Consequently, the first assembly was dissolved by court order, although Islamist parties argued that this decision did not conform to the SCAF's original constitutional declaration (2011). Indeed, although the original set of regulations did not state how the constitutional assembly should be appointed, members of the military council argued that article 60 of the original constitutional declaration was too vague to guarantee a fair representation of the Egyptian population within the assembly and should be reviewed. A new constituent assembly was formed in June 2012, which included delegates from the armed forces, representatives from judiciary and trade unions as well as members of the Coptic Church. The new assembly was intended to include 50% of Islamist representatives for 50% of liberal and Civil parties' members. However, the liberal opposition stated that

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18360403>;

traditionalists still represented the majority of seats and parties such as Al-Masryeen Al-Ahrar kept calling for a boycott of the constitution.

## **8.2. The crowdsourcing process**

A first constitutional draft was issued on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2012, after which the constitutional assembly implemented a nationwide campaign promoting the constitution via mainstream media channels. Additionally, supporters of the constitution hosted consultation meetings and information centres in order to stimulate participation. The Freedom and Justice party launched its own campaign advertising, “yes” to the constitutional referendum. In reaction, opposition groups, such as the 6<sup>th</sup> April movement and the now-defunct National Democratic Party group publically contested the fact that the new constitution maintained the privileges of the elite in power, while restraining the rights of religious minorities.

Following the resignation of a few of the members of the Egyptian Bloc alliance<sup>56</sup>, liberal leaders, including former candidate Amru Mussa, requested that the seats should be replaced by representatives of the Christian community. Hamdeen Sabahy and Mohammed El Baradei called for the mobilisation of left wing and revolutionary organisations - such as the Kefaya movement – to boycott the Constituent Assembly.

Strong criticism had been expressed regarding article number 2 of the constitutional draft, which established the sharia as the basis of Egyptian law. Opponents of the constitutional draft stated that the text did not fairly represent pluralism of opinion within the population and restricted the rights of the Coptic minority. They contested the fact that the new constitutional text remained extremely vague, which potentially enabled ruling elites to circumvent the law or promulgate new regulations that would serve their interest. Various protests and demonstrations took place over the course of the drafting process as well as when the final draft had been submitted to the referendum.

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<sup>56</sup> Political alliance formed by liberal, leftist, social democratic and other opponents to the Muslim Brotherhood. The alliance was originally formed during the 2011 Parliamentary election and remained active after the election of president Morsi in 2012.

By the end of the drafting process, 236 articles had been produced for which 320 had been originally drafted. However, most of the changes made to the original draft did not substantially modify the meaning of the articles, and rather intended to slightly improve and review their formulations.

### **8.3. Polemics and controversies**

New parliamentary elections were expected within three months after the referendum, if the constitutional draft was to be accepted. Alternatively, a new constituent assembly would have to be formed within the same period of time<sup>57</sup>. The polemic intensified in the days that preceded the referendum scheduled on 15<sup>th</sup> December, as opponents condemned Islamists for attempting to influence voters.

Leaders of the opposition, who had previously been involved in the presidential debate, such as Mohammed El Baradei, Hamdeen Sabahy and Amru Mussa formed the National Salvation Front. The coalition intended to consolidate the opposition against the Islamist majority and called Egyptians to vote “no” to the constitutional referendum. Members of the “no campaign” contested the fact that the constitutional draft primarily reflected the interest and ideological vision of the Muslim Brotherhood and failed at preserving the rights of women and the Christian minorities.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> November, President Morsi issued a constitutional decree, in which he granted himself ultimate power over <sup>58</sup> the Parliamentary chambers, allowing him to promulgate new laws by decree and to annul on-going adjudication. In this constitutional declaration, the president assigned a new prosecutor and extended the period of time originally set for the activity of the constituent assembly, which was limited to 15 days between the issue of the final draft and the date of the referendum. The decree also prevented the Shura Council

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<sup>57</sup> <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/60092/Egypt/Politics-/Morsis-decree-cancelled,-constitution-referendum-t.aspx>; (Al Ahram Online, 09/12/2012)

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20829911>; (BBC News, 23.12.2012)

from being dissolved by the judiciary and established the predominance of the presidential administration over the military council.

Although president Morsi was celebrated for restricting military authorities, his decree was interpreted as an attempt to control legislative powers and stimulated a wave of protests. From that moment, the tension reached its heights outside as well as within the political circles represented in the new government.

Judges in charge of supervising the polling stations went on strike to contest Morsi's constitutional decree and manifest their discontent regarding the appointment of the new prosecutor<sup>59</sup>. The strike considerably affected the organisation of the referendum, making it impossible to administer the poll in one round. The suffrage would take place in two different rounds, which might have affected the outcome, given that citizens voting on the second round could have been influenced by preliminary results.

Demonstrations, sometimes leading to violent confrontations took place across the country, contesting the fact that the new president might hold all executives and legislative powers. On 5<sup>th</sup> December, clashes occurred between members of the Muslim Brotherhood and protestors conducting peaceful demonstrations in front of the presidential palace. The event led to six deaths and 400 injuries. The constitutional decree was revoked on December 6<sup>th</sup>. On the 9<sup>th</sup> December 2012, after considering the possibility of postponing the suffrage<sup>60</sup>, Morsi confirmed his intention of submitting the referendum. By doing so, he conformed to SCAF's original 2011 constitutional declaration, stipulating that a referendum should take place 15 days after the president received a final draft from the Constituent Assembly.<sup>61</sup> Secretary general Zaghloul al-Bashy and vice president Mahmoud

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<sup>59</sup> <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/59693/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-expats-to-vote-on-constitution--December--.aspx> ; (Al Ahram Online, 03/12/2012)

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2012/12/07/constitutional-referendum-postponed/> ; (Daily News Egypt, 07/12/2012)

<sup>61</sup> <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/60092/Egypt/Politics-/Morsis-decree-cancelled.-constitution-referendum-t.aspx> ; (Al Ahram Online, 09/12/2012)

Mekki both resigned in December<sup>62</sup>. On 15<sup>th</sup> December 2012, the referendum took place with a 32.9%<sup>63</sup> (34% according to participants interviewed) turnout and with 63,8% of eligible voters voting in favour of the new constitution in Cairo.

The first Constituent assembly, which was formed in January 2012, was composed of members of the House of Representatives who had been elected by the Egyptian people during the Parliamentary elections. The second Constituent Assembly included 39% of MPs, who had been elected by the people. During the process of drafting the constitution, the assembly was divided into five committees<sup>64</sup> assigned to the five different chapters of the constitution. Additionally, a sixth committee – composed of members of the assembly - was in charge of ensuring participation and consultation.

In the early stage of the deliberations, the committee in question hosted hearing sessions in different governorates' city halls and public universities to collect feedbacks and inputs from citizens in different governorates. Supporting staff were in charge of collecting all forms of suggestions and enquires from citizens and reporting feedback to the assembly after analysing it. All meetings of the constituent assembly were broadcasted by national TV Channels.

Over the weeks that preceded the 22<sup>nd</sup> November decree, the person in charge of supervising the work conducted to promote the drafting process and its transparency publically resigned. The interview conducted with two participants involved in the implementation of the project revealed that the participative dimension of the constitution draft reached a critical point at this stage. Due to the polemic of Morsi's decree, Islamist

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/elections-commission-secretary-general-resigns>; (Egypt Independent, 19/12/2012)

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-constitution-passes-638-percent-approval-rate> ; (Egypt Independent, 25/12/2012)

<sup>64</sup> “The Basic Principles of the State & the Egyptian Society Committee”, “The Rights, Freedoms, and Public Duties Committee”, “Regime and Public Authority Committee”, “Regulatory and Independent Bodies Committee”, and “Drafting and Research Committee”

parties regained control over the constitution and the company in charge of administering the *Dostour Sharek* platform did not have the opportunity to present an overview of participants' inputs to the assembly.

#### **8.4. Interviewing the people behind the Dostour Sharek initiative**

The two participants interviewed for this chapter had been involved in the technological design and administrative implementation of the *Dostour Sharek* project. As such, they experienced different challenges, while collaborating closely with each other to administer and update the consultation platform between July and November 2012.

The first participant interviewed, Nouredin<sup>65</sup>, had been working as a software developer for an external company mandated by the government. The company in question was in charge of creating a voters database in preparation of the first post-revolutionary referendum, in March 2011. The Middle Eastern branch of Google had initially introduced his software engineering team to the government and provided the financial support required to develop new applications intended to facilitate voters' participation. After January 2011, the government appointed the company in question to create a functional voters database in order to handle voters' registration and inform citizens of the location of poll stations. Due to the short notice, the public administration did not have the financial resources to pay for the work commissioned and Nouredin's company accepted to provide the services requested by the state without remuneration. Afterwards, the work provided by his company for the Egyptian government was paid. Among the projects designed by the company in question, the *Dostour Sharek* initiative had been envisioned and suggested to the government by Nouredin and his team.

The main aspect of the project that seduced the constituent assembly was the fact that the company would have conducted a computerised sentiment analysis, summarising participants' views for every single article of the draft. The outcome of the analysis would have been presented to the assembly in the later stage of the drafting process. However, the

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<sup>65</sup> The name of the participant has been anonymised

precipitation with which Morsi's administration submitted the constitutional draft in early December put an end to the final stage of the project. Nouredin noticed a conflict of interests between the members of the administration in charge of communicating the updates of the draft, which affected the original purpose of the project.

His company handled the technical administration of the platform and was asked to create a code that would filter any comment, including inappropriate language. Additionally, administrators created a new code to filter any comments copied and pasted from previous contributions. The decision was taken after the Salafi leader and former presidential candidate Hazem Salah Abu Ismail had called all his supporters to copy and paste the same comment on article number 2 of the constitutional draft.

The article in question was the most contested article of the draft, according to Dostour Sharek's statistics, and one of the most controversial articles according to commentators as it stated that Islam was to be the main source of Egyptian law. Abu Ismail, had invited his followers to argue that Islam should be referred to as *the one and only source* for Egyptian law and this argument soon became the most recurrent topic addressed for this specific article. After the incident, the designers of the *Dostour Sharek* project ensured that the same comment would not be recurrently posted for a single article.

The second participant interviewed for this study, Said<sup>66</sup>, worked within the government to run a campaign of information about the referendum. According to him, the first issue of the constitutional draft did not raise a lot of criticism among citizens and members of civil parties. The constituent assembly also appeared to be very reluctant at delivering draft articles in the early stage of the drafting process, to the point that he sometimes had to "steal" them in order to make them public. Progressively, the assembly took consideration of the feedback reported from the committee and supporting staff in charge of analysing the comments. Some of the most common and unanimous views had been considered before redrafting the articles. Yet, the consultative infrastructure implemented to draft the

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<sup>66</sup> The identity of the participant has been anonymised

constitution was threatened in late November, due the struggles generated by the constitutional decree.

Despite the conjunction of communication channels applied to involve citizens in the drafting process, the debate remained highly polarized and resulted in a relatively low turnout and in the opposition's call to boycott the referendum. Therefore, whereas e-governance research would commonly seek to assess to what extent citizens' inputs have been incorporated into the outcome of a political project, this case study also brings us to reflect on how participation was intended to act as a means of legitimisation (Hart, 2003; Maboudi and Nadi, forthcoming<sup>67</sup>).

### **8.5. Success of the Dostour Sharek e-consultation project in terms of interactivity**

The analysis conducted on the first set of comments posted on the Dostour Sharek website highlights some of the characteristics of the constitutional debate. A first observation can be formulated with regards to the level of *interactivity*. From the perspective of e-governance studies, *interactivity* mainly refers to the level of interactions occurring between citizens and the public administration (Chatfield and Alhujran, 2009).

In this particular case, one might argue that the constituent assembly essentially responded to citizens' comments by reviewing the constitutional draft on a regular basis. Besides, interaction occurred offline thanks to the infrastructure implemented during the drafting process, such as the committees in charge of collecting citizens' suggestions in local districts. However, the Dostour Sharek e-consultation platform did not lead to any direct interactions between citizens and policymakers.

On the basis of Habermas' public sphere, some may also interpret interactivity as the level of interplay between participants. When applying Habermas' model, Cardon (2010) and Flichy (2010) would for instance argue that a successful debate relies on the process

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.american.edu/spa/gov/upload/democracy2013-nadi-maboudi.pdf>

through which different perspectives oppose and challenge each other. This is precisely the reason why their work investigates whether digital technology users are likely to confront their views and critically respond to each other's statements. In the case of the 2012 *Dostour Sharek* initiative, this form of interaction is hardly noticeable, as users never directly refer to each other's comments, nor directly address each other's arguments.

Rather, as I will demonstrate, we find a certain degree of interactivity in the way participants restate the same criticisms, and come, by all appearances to a consensus, when interpreting and discussing draft articles. Nevertheless, whether it comes to interactions among users or between policymakers and participants it clearly stands out that this lack of interactivity was due to the way the participation platform was originally designed. Unlike social media interface, the platform did not include subcomments, enabling participants to respond to each other's remarks.

Admittedly, participants' accounts linked to their social media profile (Facebook), notifying their network that they had contributed to the *Dostour Sharek* project. However, no function was designed to address personalised messages to them. Unlike any discussion forum, the *Dostour Sharek* platform was not designed in a way that generates a flow of conversation between either of the actors involved. The input of the constituent assembly was limited to posting regular updates on the constitutional draft. Likewise, participants were only able to post personalised comments and rank the articles by using a *like* or *dislike* notification.

To some extent this relays to a statement formulated by one of the participants I interacted with during the course of the fieldwork I conducted for this study. While reflecting on the evolution of social media usage, he compared Egyptians' application of digital technologies to a therapy, suggesting that Egyptian people started to use participative media as a way to release and express themselves, instead of developing a bilateral debate.

To some extent, the design of the *Dostour Sharek* platform enhanced this phenomenon, as it primarily intended to gather a collection of individual comments. For instance, some

participants successively posted the same comments for different articles, no matter the object of the articles in question. In most cases, these inputs addressed the entire constitutional draft calling for electors to vote yes or no to the referendum. Whilst some participants promoted the draft, others explicitly stated that it did not succeed in achieving the purpose of the revolution. However, none of these comments specifically addressed the content of the articles below which they had been posted.

More specifically, the particularity of these comments lies in the fact that they did not develop any reflection on the content of the constitutional draft, nor on the criticism previously formulated by other participants. Admittedly, such messages are not entirely unilateral, because some of them are addressed to a specific audience. For instance, many comments included implicit as well as explicit addresses to the constituent assembly, complimenting them for the constitutional draft or asking them to improve specific articles. This suggests that citizens participated with the intention of contributing to the drafting process, beyond the satisfaction they might have got from publicly expressing their views. Yet this also indicates that what one might consider as a deliberative and interactive space has often been applied to assert pre-defined personal opinions.

#### **8.6. Hidden interactivity: the sense of consensus**

As mentioned above, no direct interactions occurred between any of the actors involved in the deliberative process. However, participants recurrently raised the same issues when commenting on the content of the articles. I was therefore able to identify several trends or topics for each set of comments analysed. Despite the fact that the platform did not allow any form of interactive deliberation, participants appeared to easily reach consensus, as they often formulated the same criticisms. In fact, what could be perceived as a form of consensus is not the outcome of a rational argumentation between different actors interacting with each other, in Cardon (2010) or Flichy's (2010) terms. As such, it is not compatible with Habermas' definition of the public sphere. Alternatively, although series of concurrent arguments can be found across the data set, no evidence allows me to think that the flow of early comments might have influenced the later ones. In other words, given

that this sense of consensus cannot be related (correlated) to any obvious form of interactivity, it is as if participants initially and individually produced a similar interpretation of the draft.

Once again, this case study forces us to extend our understanding of interactivity. The analysis attests that a substantial number of later comments are in line with the comments that preceded and that a continuation of ideas takes place. This is precisely what brings me to postulate the formation – or pre-existence - of a consensus. Although this consensus is not the result of direct interactions, one can easily argue that it demonstrates a high level of intertextuality. Here I refer to intertextuality - as an implicit form of interactivity, since it consists in discursive rather than social interconnection. In other words, the cohesion of arguments across comments shows that users might have interacted indirectly, by conveying a common interpretation of the constitutional draft.

This is particularly meaningful, when it comes to building theory around concepts such as e-democracy or connectivity, as it suggests that interactivity is not a prerequisite for consensus. On the contrary, the most common and predominant arguments might produce a stronger sense of consensus, when they are not challenged by any form of interactive deliberation. Therefore, without distinguishing interactivity and intertextuality, one can easily be mistaken, by considering dominant discourses as the result of a democratic and interactive deliberation. Indeed, intertextuality evidences the existence of a common ground and a shared set of beliefs, whereas interactivity often leads to the chaotic confrontation of diverging opinions.

**Table 20: Distinguishing Interactivity and Intertextuality**

<b>INTERACTIVITY</b>	<b>INTERTEXTUALITY</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social connections</li> <li>• Confrontations of idea, beliefs and opinions</li> <li>• Potentially leads to development of rational argumentation : liberalisation of discourse (Habermas, 1962)</li> <li>• Deliberative consensus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discursive connections</li> <li>• Consolidation/Affirmation of common ground</li> <li>• Potentially leads to reaffirmation of an institutional discourse (Foucault, 1971)</li> <li>• Pre-existing consensus</li> </ul>

To a large extent, the most recurrent criticism, which was formulated on the Dostour Sharek platform pointed to the vagueness of the articles. Participants agreed on the fact that many of the concepts stated in constitutional laws should be clearly redefined.

For this sample and according to the different arguments identified for this content analysis, the most consensual comments represented between 30% and 40% of the contributions posted for each of the 29 articles. For instance, among the 56 comments considered for article number 5 of the draft – which stated that national sovereignty belonged to the people - 34% of the comments requested clarifying how people’s sovereignty should be exercised.

In some cases, contributors explicitly condemned the fact that the lack of clarity of the draft would give too much power to legislators, who will be in charge of introducing further regulations. This clearly stood out from the comments analyzed for articles number 14 and 18 of the draft, which both included a final statement specifying that further regulations and potential exceptions would be applicable by law.

### **8.7. Preventing exceptions to the law: articles 14 and 18**

To some extent, article 14 resonated with some of the most fundamental demands that had been expressed by revolutionaries in the early stage of the uprisings. The article in question asserted that economical developments should support *social justice* and *solidarity*, by improving standards of living, preserving the rights of the working class and allowing a fair distribution of wealth. Additionally, it briefly addressed the question of minimum salaries, establishing that minimum wages and pensions should be sufficient to allow decent conditions of life. A final statement instituted that a maximum wage would be determined in the public sector, while permitting potential exceptions that would be justified by law.

Most of the criticisms expressed in the comments underlined the fact that none of the concepts mentioned in the article had been appropriately defined. Among them, 21% of the contributions claimed that the amount or proportion of minimum wage should be specified in the article and that its value should be determined in relation to inflation. Another considerable number of comments – 37% - argued that the article should not include any potential exception that might enable policymakers to circumvent this regulation.

Article 18, which established the responsibility of the State in preserving and managing public resources, generated a similar reaction. Indeed, this section of the constitutional draft specified that natural resources should be preserved and administered for the sake of public good and that no concession should be granted by the state to exploit these resources, unless it might be justified by law. In this case again, 12 out of the 41 comments analyzed contested the exception formulated in the article. To a large extent these reactions coincided with a first set of criticisms that condemned the lack of clarity of the new constitutional text. Vague articles would require further legislation before becoming fully applicable. This would inevitably limit citizens' consultative power, while providing the parliamentary chambers with more room for manoeuvre.

### 8.8. Article 6: negotiating the meaning of *Shura* and *democracy*

In many cases, contributors underlined the fact that some of the concepts addressed appeared to be too intangible and had to be clarified by including further regulations. This highlighted the fact that some of the notions through which the post-revolutionary debate had been framed remained fluid and easily distorted by the different political actors involved.

In view of this, the draft of article 6, which defined the Egyptian political system as *democratic* stimulated a controversial discussion on the distinction between *Shura* and *democracy*. Just like article 5 was often interpreted as the negation of God's sovereignty, the idea of a democratic state was perceived as in contradiction with the Islamic concept of *Shura* and the ideal of a society based on Islamic law. In fact, comments demonstrated that democracy, which the international community often perceived as the primary motive of the revolution, was still the object of an ongoing debate among the Egyptian people. Admittedly, middle class revolutionaries aspired at eradicating corruption and improving the representation of the youth and the working class in the future government. However, this claim was not received, nor was it upheld by the broader population as a pro-democracy argument.

Both the discursive analysis and interviews conducted for this chapter revealed that what commentators and international media might have interpreted as a struggle for democracy was only the sign of an overwhelming discontent (Jumet, 2014). Indeed, the real motives of Egyptians' mobilization, in early 2011, lied in people's everyday economical struggles. Just as my ethnography was about to demonstrate, young revolutionaries failed at embodying the conceptual ideals and values of the revolution – such as human *dignity or social justice* – by referring to the practical needs of the lower class.

A similar gap took shape between the way Western social scientists attempted to understand the uprisings and the reality of the ground. Indeed, whereas the Arab Spring became the ultimate case study to discuss democratisation in the age of informational capitalism, the event did not have very much to do about democratisation (Lopes de Souza

and Lipietz, 2011; Sarquis, 2012; Jumet, 2014). Beyond the fact that democracy *per se* was not considered as a priority, interviews revealed that the concept of democracy was commonly understood by the average population as a Western form of secularist state.

As such it opposed itself to the model of Islamic Shura, according to which citizens and government representatives debate the legislation on the basis of Islamic law. This common belief, which appears to be very strong among the Egyptian population beyond Islamist parties official discourse – clearly reflected itself in the comments posted on article 6 of the constitutional draft.

Yet, among many other examples identified in this sample, a large amount of comments intended to discuss the meaning of the term “ democracy” and to question its application in the constitutional text. More specifically, such comments demonstrated citizens’ urge to clarify and refine the broader concepts that had been addressed during the revolutionary phase and had progressively been incorporated into different – and sometimes conflicting – political discourses. This precisely explains some of the confusion, misunderstandings and sometimes-contradictory reactions I have observed, when analyzing how this set of constitutional articles was received.

### **8.9. Negotiating the meaning of sufficiency, justice, equity and freedom**

The most recurrent response generated by article 6 of the draft regarded a statement of the article stipulating that no political party should be based on discriminatory criteria of distinctions between citizens, such as gender, origins or religion. 18 out of 87 comments considered for this article questioned whether Islamists parties would still conform to their ideology if they complied with this rule. While some of these comments came to question the legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Noor party, others requested to remove this reservation in order to avoid any formulation that might discredit Islamist movements.

Here again, participants' reactions revealed that the constitutional text relied on a fluid vocabulary, which could lead to very different interpretations. On one hand, the article failed at clarifying to what extent Islamist parties might conform to this particular definition of a discriminatory ideology. On the other hand, it did not provide any clear definition of what should be considered as *democratic* versus *discriminatory*, allowing every reader to interpret those terms from her ideological perspective. Participants' comments therefore display diverging understandings of these concepts, which illustrates how future legislation could have easily restricted the application of this constitutional article.

In this context, the terms “non-discriminatory” and “democratic” are often interpreted and understood as *secular*. This is precisely what brings up a misunderstanding when the constitution defines Islam as the main source of Egyptian law (article 2), while promoting democratic representation and non-discriminatory politics (article 6).

A similar phenomenon has been observed for the set of comments extracted from article 8, according to which the State shall ensure social solidarity and aim at providing “sufficiency” for all citizens. In this case, 34% of comments requested to clearly define the notion of *sufficiency* as well as the conditions, according to which a sufficient level of life could be reached.

Another 16% requested to specify how the state could commit to provide “sufficiency” for all Egyptians citizens and to clarify its engagement. Here again, the article undeniably alluded to some of the major revolutionary concepts, affirming that the state should provide the means to achieve “justice, equity and freedom”. In this regard, the constitutional draft re-affirmed the legitimacy of a broad – and therefore equivocal - set of values that had contributed to build social cohesion in the early stage of the uprisings.

Nevertheless, although the terms “justice”, “equity” and “freedom” echoed the slogans of the revolution, they only acted as idiomatic expressions were not further conceptualised in the constitutional draft. Beyond the lyricism of terms such as “compassion” and “social

equity”, the article failed at defining how these conceptual ideals would materialize in future legislation and policymaking. This precisely brought participants to question the actual meaning of the term ‘sufficiency’ as well as to address the limitations of the state’s engagement in this matter.

First, this highlights the fact that what was often reproached to revolutionaries themselves - to wit the failure at concretely addressing social issues from the perspective of the grassroots - also applies to the way the constituent assembly incorporated the revolutionary discourse.

Secondly, the two types of comments identified indicated that Egyptian citizens expressed the need to discuss revolutionary demands with regards to their everyday life socioeconomic challenges. Although *freedom, equality* and *social justice* produced a sense of consensus, the indefinite meaning, hence flexibility of the terms would lead to confusion, by serving different political interests.

On one hand, contributors’ comments revealed citizens’ attachment to the ideological vocabulary of the revolution— *freedom, dignity, equality, justice* - in the post-revolutionary debate. Yet on the other hand, participants explicitly requested from the constituent assembly to outline the procedures through which those concepts would be applied.

In addition to the sample of comments extracted from article 14, contributions to article 7 of the draft exemplify these two trends. The article in question, which calls for the preservation of national security and announces that military conscription will be mandatory, generated two recurrent reactions.

25% of the comments analysed argued that the draft should include further regulations on military service. Within this set of comments, the most common criticism concerned the fact that no additional information was given about the duration of the conscription, the wage of recruits and the potential conditions for exemption. To some extent, these observations highlighted citizens’ desire to see pragmatic changes and discuss how

policymakers would enact the vocabulary of the revolution. Simultaneously, these comments demanded to include a statement intended to protect the rights and “dignity” of military recruits. Here again, participants spontaneously emphasised the importance of this term, which was part of the ideological vocabulary inherited from the 2011 uprisings. Yet just like the concept of democracy, this term only activated one’s personal ideological views on how dignity should be materialised in future legislation.

Consequently, a proportion of comments posted on article 7 also stated that the draft should detail the rights of military recruits. In other words, participants enquired about the applicable measures that would ensure dignity in the particular case of military conscription. Additionally, another 7% of the comments sampled for this article argued that the constitutional text should enjoin young militaries to treat civilians with greater respect. This other category of contributions also reflected the will to be involved in a more engaging form of policymaking that would ensure the realization of the revolutionary demands.

Similarly, participants reacted to the wording of article 26, which introduces tax regulations by referring to the concept of social justice: “Social justice is based on taxes and other expenditures of public finances.” Out of the 34 comments considered, one argued that social justice should not essentially depend on the administration of public finance, but on a broader set of laws. A second participant requested from the constituent assembly to elaborate on the relationship between taxes and social justice. Once again, these two examples manifested the desire to assess and improve the practicability of an important *motive* and *leitmotiv* of the revolution. But most importantly, examining the way the revolutionary vocabulary was received in the context of the first constitutional draft shows how critical citizens had become, with regard to the *marketization* of those concepts.

### **8.10. Clarifying vagueness and *uncertainties***

Beyond the fact that participants proved to interpret the ideological vocabulary of the revolution differently, they repeatedly asked for the constitutional text to be clarified. Confusion often occurred, in comments related to articles that addressed potential conflict of interests between the state and private individuals. With regards to this, articles 24 and 29 generated a discussion about the distinction between private and public good, suggesting that the limitations between those two concepts should be explicitly stated in the constitution.

By analogy, comments extracted from article 22 of the draft, regulating the preservation of public finances, precisely illustrate this pattern: “Public funds are inviolable and it is a national duty of the state and society to ensure their preservation.” In this case, 34% of the comments archived argued that the article should state the sanctions applicable in case of frauds. This remark undeniably appeared as a way to decry the vagueness of the article. In addition, contributors challenged the fact that the wording itself did not emphasize the responsibility of the state in ensuring the preservation of public finances. Indeed, 11% of the posts sampled suggested that civil society per se could not be considered as responsible for the protection of public resources. The three occurrences showed that incoherence of the constitutional text was even more problematic<sup>68</sup> when legislating the boundaries between public and private interests.

In other cases, the lack of clarity directly affected citizens’ ability to understand the meaning of the article. In this regard, contributors to the article 26 mentioned above commonly requested the definition of the Egyptian fiscal framework to be clarified. The draft briefly enacted a progressive tax procedure, which induced great confusion, bringing some participants to question the entire meaning of the article. Besides the fact that the terminology of the constitutional text was misleading, its entire formulation also proved to be disconcerting.

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<sup>68</sup> That is to say this type of constitutional statements generated even more criticism among the members of the Dostour Sharek participative platform.

Apart from the ambiguity of the revolutionary concepts and the ambivalence of the constitutional text itself, the e-consultation platform's users pointed that the draft applied a confusing vocabulary and failed at providing comprehensive measures. Along the inputs appended to article 22 cited above, reactions to articles 21 and 23 mainly related to the aspects of the law that were missing from the article. Paragraph 21 of the constitution stated the right and "legitimacy of any public cooperative or private organization", administered in compliance with the law. 15% of comments argued that the law should explicitly prevent foreigners and foreign investors from owning such private cooperatives. 7% of the comments sampled claimed that the article should include a definition and further regulation on intellectual property.

Finally, 35% of the reactions to article 23 of the draft that ensured the support of the state to "all kinds of cooperatives" claimed that the cooperatives in question should be clearly defined. These reactions indicated that participants had been sensitive to the fact the constitutional draft did not only fail at defining the conditions for freedom, justice and equity, but also omitted the information required for their legal application.

A comparable register of comments specifically raised the fact that some articles omitted to determine the procedure required to ensure that the law given would be applied. This stood out from the sample of posts extracted from both articles 18 and 22 quoted above, for which a small proportion of participants expressed this same demand.

In comparison to the many comments intended to outline the incoherence or lack of clarity of the draft, only a small proportion of articles led participants to position themselves in relation to the object of the constitutional law. In fact, a very few discussions took place across the data set to debate the actual substance of the article.

To some extent this suggests that contributors expressed more concern about the formal aspect of the draft, mostly focusing on its formulation, sporadically suggesting artificial improvements by notifying irrelevant and missing information. In fact, this would also

explain why the statistics delivered by the Dostour Sharek initiative indicated a significantly larger number of “likes” than “dislike”.

However, acknowledging this phenomenon does not and should not put in doubt their ability to develop a substantial and rational critical deliberation, which would conform with Habermas’ definition of the public sphere. Quite the opposite, it shows that Egyptian citizens involved in this e-participation project pointed a highly problematic feature of the post-revolutionary debate, which resided in the confusing nature of the discourse that surrounded the revolution.

As demonstrated in previous chapters, this emanated from the ambivalence of the terms, the misleading formulations and the lack of clarity with which policymakers – as well as all the political actors engaged in the debate<sup>69</sup> – competed for different versions of the revolution.

The ambiguity of the terms “democracy”, “sufficiency”<sup>70</sup>, “social equity”, “public good” and many other crucial concepts enumerated above constituted in themselves the major obstacle to the development of a potentially efficient public sphere. Therefore, the fact that participants primarily contested this aspect of the draft, which characterised the entire post-revolutionary debate, should rather be interpreted as a sign of critical thinking and clairvoyance.

As argued earlier, the constitution represented one of the major steps towards what different political groups expected to be the potential materialization of the revolutionary demands. Originally, the consultative process initiated by the Dostour Sharek project intended to assess to what extent the new constitution will ensure the realization of those

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<sup>69</sup> This has been confirmed by the findings of the ethnography as well as by the discourse analysis conducted on the sample of the activist blogosphere.

<sup>70</sup> “sufficiency” refers to the Arabic word *Kifaya*, which was addressed in article 8 of the constitutional draft and that can also be considered as one of the leitmotifs of the revolution. The word also relates to the activist movement *Kifaya*, which pioneered Egyptian cyber-activism and was among the first opposition movement that led to the revolution.

demands. However, the initiative was even more revealing, as it demonstrated that those demands themselves were not commonly understood, often hiding divergent visions of what the future Egyptian society should be. There was a consensus about acknowledging a lack of consensus and an agreement about the fact that most of the stakeholders involved in the deliberation disagreed.

### **8.11. Conclusion to empirical analysis 3: Connectivity as an illusion of consensus**

In conclusion, instead of building a strong and unique consensus, participants' comments confronted diverging understandings of the ideological vocabulary that had emerged in the context of the 2011 uprisings. In the continuation of the revolution, citizens were still commonly debating the concepts of justice, social equity and freedom as well as the application of Islamic law and the balance between civilian and military powers.

In this regard, the debate manifests a high level of intertextuality: as I argued earlier, contributors show interest for the same topics and raise concern about similar issues. And yet their perspectives appear to be very different. This is the reason why intertextuality can be misleading, in bringing us to think that participants progressively reach consensus, whereas they express their own pre-existing interpretation of the same concepts. In other words, intertextuality shall not be mistaken with interactivity.

To some extent, those two concepts both potentially apply to such form of participative debates, as they reveal some form of *polyphony*. However, whereas the participants of an interactive debate collaboratively shape a common understanding of the same object, intertextuality hides multiple and sometimes-diverging interpretations behind the same term.

According to this terminology, the samples of comments extracted from the Dostour Sharek project suggest that the 2012 constitutional debate was rather intertextual than *interactive*. Yet, this study also demonstrates that the most recurrent and vivid criticism

expressed with regards to the constitutional draft precisely lied in the fact that it generated such a high level of intertextuality.

Indeed, by requesting further definitions of these concepts, citizens manifested the desire to overcome the confusion that jeopardised the quality of the post-revolutionary debate. While confronting diverging visions of *Shura* and *democracy*, they manifested the need to rely on a clear and very specific description of these terms. After the different political groups had been competing in the context of the elections, citizens requested redefining the ideological vocabulary of the revolution, in order to ensure sustainable political change.

The ambiguous vocabulary of the revolution had benefitted all the political groups competing for power and was to some extent the result of revolutionaries' connective action, in Bennett and Segerberg's terms (2012). It had been designed to consolidate the diversified community of people that composed the opposition and was therefore likely to resonate differently depending on its audience. *Connective action* – in Bennett and Segerberg's terms – was entirely based on *intertextuality*, hence on an illusion of consensus. Consequently, it had supposedly contributed to divide the revolutionary opposition in periods of election, and was now affecting the consultative process of the referendum.

This opens up a crucial reflection about the correlation between connectivity and political instability. As this case study suggests, certain forms of connective action lead to intertextuality, which is nothing less than an illusion of consensus in a very heteroclitic and polarised environment. Yet in the age of semantic web, where pop-culture and political slogans are marketed via search keywords, tags and hashtags, social cohesion is very much relying on intertextuality.

This could also explain why – as mentioned in my methodological chapter – the statistics released by the Dostour Sharek platform inventoried a majority of positive rates (“likes” or “thumb up” as opposed to “thumb down”), despite the fact that many comments formulated constructive criticisms. This figure was not representative of the fact that the

constitutional draft had been received as highly controversial and motivated the Egyptian people to protest again for the removal of Morsi's administration in 2013. However, it illustrates the fact that computerised deliberations can sometimes lead to a rather artificial and less substantial consensus.

With today's semantic web-based communication, the same word or idiom circulates across cultures and political contexts, while hiding different perceptions of reality. This may certainly contribute to build the success of a campaign on the short term, as political actors are more likely to see their legitimacy increase rapidly, by applying an all-inclusive yet extremely vague ideological vocabulary. However, this may also involve a rapid decrease in popularity for the same political actors over time.

At the time of the 2012 constitutional referendum, Mohammed Morsi's government and the Muslim Brotherhood were about to be the victims of their own success in these exact circumstances. Similarly, the removal of Mubarak's administration in January 2011 constituted a short-lived success for left-wing and liberal revolutionaries, who would soon witness substantial conflicts of interests within the revolutionary community.

On these grounds, one could easily argue that participative communication tools had contributed to produce the fluid discursive environment thanks to which the revolution was progressively hijacked. This assumption should however be discussed in relation with the ethnography I conducted in the field, as it enables to set digital media usage in a broader context of sociopolitical practices.

Accordingly, the next chapter will outline the findings of the 15 qualitative interviews I conducted with activists, journalists and political officials during ten weeks fieldwork in Cairo. Unlike the data samples I collected online, this methodological approach expanded my perspective, drawing my attention on the relationship between online and offline forms of deliberation. However critical one may be with regards to the technological aspects, this chapter will address the question of its significance and further determine its influence on the evolution of the revolutionary discourse.

## 9. Fourth empirical analysis: fieldwork ethnography

Among the four empirical analyses that compose this research, the ethnography allowed me to assess whether my online data set was representative of the deliberations occurring outside from the social media sphere. By interacting face-to-face with participants, I was now able to interpret my preliminary findings in relation to the way political activists had experienced the evolution of the revolutionary discourse on the field. Participants' perspective also led me to understand digital activism in relation to a broader range of media and political practices, as well as to re-evaluate its impact on Egyptians' everyday life and political environment.

As I will argue in this chapter, all participants interviewed - regardless of the degree of support to the left wing or liberal opposition - had witnessed the fact that the revolution had endorsed different meanings and narratives, over the course of the 2011-2013 political crisis. This phenomenon manifested itself in different aspects of the political debate. For instance, many participants had evidenced the dispersion of the revolutionary discourse in the way political leaders as well as both state-owned and privately owned media reported the presidential and constitutional debates. In that sense, despite the fact that it reached a limited audience, social media appeared to be representative of the tensions occurring offline, in the broader media and political landscape. Admittedly, this also suggested that *the alienation of the revolution* operated beyond and independently from social media.

Nevertheless, many participants agreed that digital media intensified this phenomenon. Similarly to what I had observed when analysing the activist blogosphere, interviews highlighted the fact that digital media contributed to make the revolution less ideologically consistent, by accelerating its diffusion. For instance, social platforms such as Twitter hardly enabled one to formulate a substantial argument, given the limited amount of characters allowed in a tweet. In their views, digital media had also led to many controversies, by allowing every political stakeholder to spread rumours or release controversial statements, which would only increase the polarisation of the debate.

In addition, many participants considered such form of deliberations as problematic, in that it had produced an illusion of consensus. Social media had indeed led many web activists

to believe that they would easily find support among the majority of the working class in the aftermath of the revolution. However, their audience was often limited to a minority of supporters, amongst Internet users, whose perspective did not reflect that of the grassroots.

Those arguments corroborate most of the observations made in my virtual ethnography. Moreover, as I will show, interviews further illustrated the fact that left wing and liberal revolutionaries felt progressively deprived of intellectual leadership when attempting to consolidate the opposition. They also confirmed the idea that this was due to the process through which online-based deliberations had reached the mainstream.

Besides, participants exemplified my discursive cycle model, by reflecting on the history of web activism in Egypt. As discussed in my theoretical chapter, visualising the circulation of discourse helps in understanding whether connectivity alters the transformation of counter-power into institutional power. In that respect, this research mainly focuses on the lower pole of the discursive cycle. Yet interviews also outlined the fact that some of the policies implemented by Mubarak's former administration had encouraged the emergence of web-activism, over the years that preceded the uprisings. In doing so, they show how institutional powers often create the conditions for the emergence of a counter discourse, in a way that conforms with Habermas' bourgeois public sphere. The ethnography also highlighted how the leading political institutions had been involved in the earlier development of web activism, as per the upper pole of the discursive cycle.

In this chapter, I will show how journalists and political activists evidenced the fluidity of the revolutionary discourse in Egypt and how they relate this to social media activism. Like in the context of the activist blogosphere, I will argue that what the left wing and liberal opposition experienced as the alienation of the revolution could be explained by two phenomena.

On one hand, this was due to the sudden involvement of a broader range of citizens on social media as well as in the political sphere in general. This coincided with what I had identified earlier as the mainstreaming of the revolution. On the other hand, the alienation

of the revolution resulted from the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood's deliberate attempts to reframe the ideological vocabulary of the revolution.

As I will elaborate on this argument, I will demonstrate that pro-revolutionaries manifest nostalgia for the earlier stage of the revolution. To some extent, this reveals that they had experienced a greater feeling of empowerment when the revolutionary ideals were debated within a limited circle of individuals and aside from the sphere of institutional politics. As they progressively witness the fact that the revolutionary discourse *grows* beyond their control, they exhibit a certain attachment to the idea of intellectual leadership.

When reflecting on the failures of the revolution, many participants suggested that activists had missed the opportunity to reinforce the ideological foundation of the opposition. In this regard, they also formulate the idea that digital media might have accelerated - and affected - the process through which the opposition could have consolidated a strong ideological alternative. Furthermore, the technology had created an illusion of social cohesion, which had wrongly led them to believe that lower classes will embrace the liberal and left-wing revolutionary movement.

Therefore, most of my participants suggested that both the mainstreaming and institutionalisation of the revolution were partly induced by digital media. And in order to regain legitimacy in all these aspects of the discursive cycle, they expressed the need to interact directly with the lower classes and the rural population while, at the same time, returning to the traditional form of institutional politics.

### **9.1. Evidencing the success of the counter-revolution on the field**

Despite that the fieldwork involved considerable ethical challenges, my prior concern regarded the fact that the ethnography would take place long after the events of the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution. And yet my work adds on great insights and not least, thanks to the fact that the interviews were conducted more than three years after the 2011 uprisings. Although participants would recall the 2011 events from an entirely different perspective, they were precisely able to reflect on the way the narratives surrounding the revolution had evolved over time. With the aim of performing a nexus analysis, such approach

appeared to be much more pertinent. In fact, I believe that the time separating the ethnography from the 2011 incidents led participants to reflect on the transition from emerging to institutional discourse in a more critical way.

Interviewees commented on how the revolutionary opposition had progressively gained legitimacy in early 2011, while having experienced the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, followed by the hasty return of the SCAF in power. They provided a very reflexive overview of this succession of events, which contributed to outline the transition of discourses over time. Nevertheless the memory of the revolutionary uprisings as well as the way the struggles between the elites and the opposition was expressed remained extremely vivid and topical during the entire fieldwork.

This phenomenon, on the other hand, was due the fact that the repression intensified over the months that followed the coup and president Sissi's election. Between September and November 2014, students' unions and youth organisations, whose had remained partly politically active within universities had been weakened under the pressure of Falcon, a private security agency mandated by the state<sup>71</sup>. Many students involved in peaceful demonstrations, petitions and associative projects had been expelled or personally threatened.

The Muslim Brotherhood was disabled, as most of its leaders were imprisoned or had fled the country. As a result, the sample of participants recruited on the field did not include any member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Whenever I came to ask some of my informants if they knew any member of the former leading party, who would be likely to be interviewed, I was faced with this exact same answer: "Well..., let me think about anyone from the Muslim Brotherhood, who is not in jail..." I witnessed this reaction three or four times before being provided with two names of potential participants, who never responded to my invitations, most probably by fear of being investigated by the intelligence services.

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<sup>71</sup> <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/10/13/lists-barred-universities-falcon-executive-director/>; (Daily News Egypt, 13/10/2014)

During my fieldwork, human rights activists<sup>72</sup>, such as Yara Sallam and Sanaa Seif<sup>73</sup> had been sentenced for taking part to peaceful demonstrations. Some of the left-wing activists interviewed for this research proved to be personally affected by the incident. In reaction, many participants expressed the frustration of losing the freedom of expression gained from the 18 days that followed the 2011 protests.

In addition to the threat of the regime, the very few people remaining active within the opposition had lost the support of the population, as a result of what they called the conspiracy theory instigated by Sissi's administration. Progressively, the iconic 25<sup>th</sup> January revolution, to which both the intellectual youth and the Islamist opposition took part was depicted as the cause of the Muslim Brotherhood's success. The propaganda spread by the new military regime had convinced the people that the 25<sup>th</sup> January had affected internal security and led the country in a deeper economic crisis, affecting tourism and power supply. Since its institution, Sissi's administration had announced that the intermittent power cuts were due to "300 attacks on electricity pylons nationwide, which had deepened the crisis leading to a drop in production by up to 15 percent".<sup>74</sup> On 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2014, the Middle East Eye news website reported the issue stating that:

State television and private pro-government media have regularly reported such attacks, usually referring to the assailants as supporters and members of the Muslim Brotherhood group of ousted President Mohammed Morsi. (Middle East Eye, 05/09/2014)<sup>75</sup>

Opponents to the military regime, who once were celebrated as the heroes of the revolution were now considered responsible for the intermittent electricity cuts and gas shortages

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<sup>72</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/26/egypt-23-sentenced-over-anti-protest-law>;  
(Human Rights Watch, 26/10/2014)

<sup>73</sup> <http://freeyara-freesanaa.net/>

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypts-power-outages-compound-559103879>;  
(Middle East Eye, 05/09/2014)

<sup>75</sup> Idem

suffered by the Egyptian population. As for young revolutionaries, they had already been portrayed by Mohammed Morsi's former government as dangerous radical anarchists.

Once in power, the military regime maintained this narrative while implementing new laws that would restrict their visibility in the public and political spheres. Among the legislative reforms implemented by president Abdel Fatah as-Sissi that restrained opposition groups was the controversial amendment to article 78 of the penal code, which prevented any organisation from acting against the state's interests:

Anyone who asks for himself, or for others, or accepts, or takes – even through an intermediary – from a foreign state, or those who work for its interests, or a legal person, or a local or an international organisation, or any other entity that is not affiliated with a foreign state and does not work for its interest, cash, or transferred money, or equipment, or machines, or weapons, or ammunition, or items like it or other things, or was promised of any of that (...) With the intention of committing acts harmful to national interest, or acts like it, or acts that breach the country's independence, or unity, or territorial integrity, or committing attacks that disrupt public security and safety, shall be punished. (Al Ahram Online, 23/09/2014)<sup>76</sup>

In addition to the anti-protest law promulgated in November 2013<sup>77</sup> - which prevented any protests from taking place without formal consent of the authorities - such amendments would considerably limit the room for manoeuvre of any opposition movement.

But most importantly, this contributed to the shaping of the narrative according to which protestors and Islamists groups had been threatening national security and should be considered as public enemies. With the emergence of such narratives, the romantic ideals that surrounded the revolutionary mobilisation in early 2011, as well as the sympathy of the crowd for protestors progressively vanished. Simultaneously, the June 30<sup>th</sup> coup d'état substituted itself to the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution as the ultimate achievement of the 2011-2013 political transition and the so-called fortunate victory over the Muslim Brotherhood.

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<sup>76</sup> <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/111488.aspx>; (Al Ahram Online; 23/09/2014)

<sup>77</sup> <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/87375.aspx>; (Al Ahram Online; 25/11/2013)

The new military elite was shaping a new memory of the revolution, according to which the beneficial political change emanated from the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in the summer 2013. This phenomenon was expressed to me several times during the course of the fieldwork and was explicitly formulated by one of the participants:

They cannot say that the 25<sup>th</sup> revolution was bad. But I think now they are starting to focus more on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June revolution. It's somehow, they are trying to push the stream to neglect the 25<sup>th</sup> January revolution and they are definitely focusing more on the 30<sup>th</sup> June revolution. This is how they hear the revolution now. It's not the same revolution that we are talking about. They are changing the revolution. (...) So, as I said, it's another way of addressing it, now they address something that is completely different. So they don't really bad mouth it but still they ignore it. So it's kind like it didn't exist. Or it was the way for a better revolution, which is the 30<sup>th</sup> June, like "ok there was the 25<sup>th</sup> January, but now there's the 30<sup>th</sup> June revolution" which is like better in their own eyes. (Tariq, cf. Interview Transcripts:18)

Admittedly, commentators questioned the assumption according to which these two events should be interpreted as revolutions, sometimes suggesting that they both could be regarded as military coups (Stein, 2011; Phillips, 2011). In fact, as I demonstrated earlier, the notion of *revolution* itself - as well as many other crucial concepts that characterised the post-revolutionary debate – had endorsed different meanings, due to the complex interplay of political actors competing for the leadership of discourse.

The competition of discourses or substitution of narratives, even if it had potentially reached its final stage, was still on going at the time of the fieldwork. As it was expressed by one of the participants interviewed in this study, "(...) the narrations about the past is not unified so we are fighting about to whom the revolution over history will be successful" (Mukhtar, cf. Interview Transcript: 60). Therefore, although interviews were conducted three years after the first revolutionary protests and despite the fact that participants reflected on the events in a rather reflexive way, the phenomenon observed was still taking place at the time of the fieldwork. Until November 2014, participants had experienced different shifts in terms of discursive leadership and were still witnessing the revival of the military discourse.

## 9.2. Commenting on the post-revolutionary debate three years after the 2011 events

After conducting informal conversations over the first week of the fieldwork, I soon became more confident about the relevance of this research and discovered that participants' testimony tended to confirm my hypothesis. Indeed, the large majority of the participants I interacted with expressed the idea that the *discursive tools*<sup>78</sup> of the revolution had been reused to serve the purpose of the counter-revolution.

As they described the evolution of social media usage between 2012 and 2014, most interviewees attested that a broader and more diversified audience became active online and on social media after the 2011 revolution. Additionally they agreed to say that political elites and institutions, as well as the privately owned and public mainstream media channels started actively using digital media to reach this new audience.

Most participants described a phenomenon similar to what I had identified as the *mainstreaming* of the revolution, when analysing the activist blogosphere. In their views, the revolution had generated a liberalisation of the political debate, thanks to which all social classes and demographics were able to deliberate. However, this had made public deliberations more chaotic and likely to be manipulated when the revolutionary movement precisely needed to rely on strong ideological grounds.

Although most interviewees had witnessed this phenomenon, they did not always explicitly attribute it to digital media usage. Whereas some participants interpreted this a consequence of the constant increase in Internet penetration, others saw it as a dispersion of the revolution per se – whether technological or ideological. In the first case, it was assumed that Internet in general, had indirectly made the interplay of political voices more complex. Yet this could hardly have been anticipated nor prevented by the major political actors.

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<sup>78</sup> In this case I refer to the slogans and symbolic features of the revolutionary discourse as well as to the technological tools applied to spread the revolutionary message.

Alternatively, the second interpretation supposed that pro-revolutionary activists had considerably contributed to accelerate the liberalization of the debate. The 2011 uprisings had demonstrated how participative communication technologies could be efficient in sharing one's political views and mobilising a critical mass of citizens for a common cause. In this regard, the revolutionary movement was also partly responsible for rendering public opinion less predictable and likely to be manipulated.

That being said, whether they related this phenomenon to the 2011 revolution or not, all participants expressed the idea the social media sphere became representative of the highly polarised political environment between 2011 and 2014. Moreover, they asserted that leading political groups – most often identified as the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood – had progressively become as proactive and visible on social media as revolutionary activists, reversing the bottom-up stream into a rather top-down communication flow. This most certainly illustrates the model according to which digital media contributed to the cycle, through which emerging counter-discourses turn into power institution after gaining recognition.

Symmetrically, as mentioned earlier, interviews also exemplified the upper pole of the discursive cycle. Whereas I had essentially considered the transition from counter-discourse to discourse, I was reminded that the former military elite had encouraged social media consumption, paving the way to emergent forms of activism. This confirmed the idea that digital activism, in its early stage, relied on some form of intellectual leadership.

Indeed, interviewees described the process through which the military regime may have indirectly inspired new forms of political engagements and contributed to the formation of a critical intelligentsia. Among the leading figures of the opposition, many had been introduced to politics within the NDP administration and benefited from the same social and economic privileges as the former elite. As the young left-wing activist Elias<sup>79</sup> pointed, Gamal Mubarak – who was considered to be the most likely successor to Hosni Mubarak -

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<sup>79</sup> The name of the participant has been anonymised

had been very active in promoting new communication technologies among young university graduates looking for new economic and entrepreneurial perspectives (Sobelman, 2001). Prior to the revolution, his initiatives encouraged the young middle class to interact via participative media and share their opinion in a way that was favorable to the development of a counter-discourse.

Therefore, while I had been focusing on the transition from revolution to counter-revolution, participants drew my attention on the fact that the political discourse had been constantly evolving in Egypt. Counter-power originated from the previous institutional power just like the new dominant discourse emanated from the revolution. This further exemplified the discursive cycle, while suggesting that political and ideological identities along with their discursive framework, in Egypt, had always been flexible. In view of this, one could hardly argue that this was exclusively the result of connective action – in Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) term. Digital technologies may however have amplified or accelerated this phenomenon.

As for the transition that occurred in the lower pole of the discursive cycle, the great majority of the participants interviewed confirmed the idea that both the ideological and technological tools of the revolution had ultimately served the interests of the counter-revolution.

### **9.3. Hijacking the revolution**

When asked to what extent, in their opinion, the tools, arguments or slogans of the revolution had been used by the counter-revolution, only three out of the twelve participants formally interviewed answered negatively. Nabil, a 30-something candidate to the forthcoming parliamentary elections whom I quoted above argued that while pro-revolutionary activists had been very active online, long-established political institutions regained legitimacy by bringing the debate back to the streets. In his views, besides media campaigning, political leaders had, for instance, developed what he referred to as a form of *retail politics*.

During the course of the 2012 presidential election, candidates were particularly inclined to interact directly with their electorate on the field, which allowed them to reach the rural areas and proportion of the working that was not present on digital media. This was still the case as Nabil was campaigning for the forthcoming parliamentary election:

(...) if I'm talking about, an actual political campaign, so let's take an example, I'm running for Parliament. And one of my arsenal of communication tools is social media, so I have a social media call center, I have on ground campaign, all that good stuff, so social media as a tool (...) I mean if I wanted to appropriate a certain amount of votes to it, I'd say 10%. And it depends on where I am, I mean I am running anywhere in the greater Cairo, now this is gone be very diminished as I go to Delta or as I go to Upper Egypt, this percentage will diminish, really. (...) Are you familiar with the term political retailing<sup>80</sup>? – yea. Nothing beats political retailing. Shake the hand, kiss the baby, all that good stuff, you know, public *rara* speeches, that kind of stuff. Having people, having a well-oiled machine of campaigners...(Nabil, cf. Interview Transcripts: 48)

Such argument suggested that online campaigning was certainly not the main strategy that had been applied by the leading political forces to hijack the revolutionary mobilisation. Yet it was revealing of the fact that political officials were now competing on the same territory as revolutionaries. While protestors had reclaimed ownership of the street and the social media sphere to develop a sense of citizenship during the revolution, political institutions intended to benefit from these alternative communication channels to reach the same audience. In other words, it indicated the institutionalisation process operated beyond and independently from social media. This phenomenon had manifested itself online as well as in many other aspects of the post-revolutionary debate.

Amir, a 40-something liberal, who deplored the outcome of the revolutionary uprisings, contested the idea that the ideological vocabulary of the revolution had been incorporated by the counter-revolution. However, in this particular case, the participant essentially argued that such idea did not, in his views, justify revolutionaries' failure: "the appearance

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<sup>80</sup> The expression retail politics refers to a campaigning strategy, which consists in building the public image of a candidate, by representing him or her interacting with voters (shaking hands, kissing babies, waving at the audience)

of the counter-revolution discourse on social media is only a manifestation that the revolutionary discourse does not really serve its purpose anymore.” (Amir, Cf. Interview transcripts: 108). Other interviewees answered by the affirmative, confirming the idea according to which the features of the revolutionary counter-discourse came to serve the leading political forces (the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood).

The January 25<sup>th</sup> uprisings had unleashed a desire to be more involved and engaged in the political debate, across social classes. Yet those who ultimately benefitted from this phenomenon were the politics, who were better represented in traditional mass media, such as the militaries, as well as in the local communities and rural regions, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. As for the broader range of the middle class that had become active on social media after the uprisings, it had now access to all the different political agendas that were now equally represented online.

In relation to this, my ethnography contributed to answer the first of my research questions, in corroborating the findings of my virtual ethnography. This aspect of the interview also led me to further explore the relationship between the ideological and technological revolution and to identify whether social media prevented the success of the revolution in the long run.

#### **9.4. Identifying turning points in the circulation of discourse**

In order to determine whether the *institutionalisation* of the revolution operated beyond and independently from social media, participants were asked to comment on the way political institutions and mainstream media relayed the post-revolutionary debate. This aspect of the questionnaire demonstrated once again that many political activists had evidenced this phenomenon. Indeed, they agreed that the very meaning of the revolution had become highly flexible due to fact that different political groups capitalised on this concept.

Yet as much as it characterised the entire media and political environment, the institutionalisation process was not interpreted as a consequence of social media activism.

Rather, this resulted from the fact that the Egyptian political landscape was heavily polarised and that traditional mass media reflected the interests of the leading political forces.

For this reason, participants were hardly able to determine when social media started being used in the sphere of institutional politics. To some extent, political elites always had a certain degree of involvement in the emergence of digital activism, and this was not specific to the post-revolutionary phase. In fact, one could as well consider the upper pole of the discursive cycle to illustrate the fact that the Internet had served conflicting political agendas:

- (...) you described how progressively mainstream media became involved and official political leaders became involved and so on, but when was the shift approximately?

- Which shift? There was three or four shifts.

- Yes I mean after 2011, after the uprisings, when would you say that the mainstream mass media as well as the political elites started to get interested in what was happening online?

- (...) They did not begin on the 25<sup>th</sup> January; they began the moment we began. I mean on the 6<sup>th</sup> April, when Wael Abbas and Alaa Abdel Fatah<sup>81</sup> began blogging, at the same time, they developed their own Legan electrony<sup>82</sup>. (Elias, cf. Interview Transcripts: 102)

Indeed, from Elias' perspective, digital media already benefitted the elites in power in the early stage of digital activism. When recalling the beginning of digital activism in Egypt, Elias emphasises the fact that first Internet users gravitated in a similar environment as the elite in power. The opposition had become visible online, while some of the members of the former NDP considered investigating in digital media to stimulate the economy and reinforce national security. The confrontation between power and counter-power – or

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<sup>81</sup> Famous Egyptian blogger active on the activist blogosphere prior to 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Arabic term used to designate agents hired by political leaders and different stakeholders to act like random social media users online and promote their political message.

discourse and counter-discourse – was therefore much harder to situate over time than what my original model suggested.

In fact, my research originally relied on the assumption, according to which the circulation of discourse was divided between the spheres of political activism and institutional politics. The ethnography however suggested that some political actors happened to navigate between those two spheres of powers and that the boundary between discourse and counter-discourse was often hardly noticeable. Even when analysing the transformation of a counter-discourse in a specific historical context, one could hardly identify the exact moment of the transition from counter-power to power. This was precisely representative of the fact that, as argued earlier, discourse is ambivalent by nature, as it operates a cyclic evolution.

### **9.5. The Upper Pole of the discursive cycle: from power to counter-power**

To further illustrate this phenomenon, Elias drew my attention on the fact that many of the pioneers of online activism in Egypt had been directly involved or closely interacting with the political spheres. Young revolutionaries – such as Amr Hamzawy<sup>83</sup> - had gravitated in social environments or families, whose members were sometimes part of the military elites, or had common interests with the former National Party. Alternatively, other revolutionaries, like the famous Alaa Abdel Fatah and Wael Ghonim, who were independent from any political party in 2011, were originally affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Admittedly, before the revolution, Islamists movements were part of the repressed opposition. However, the organization consisted in an institutionalized and politically driven structure, which had already gained legitimacy as the leading opposition movement. In this regard, many of the leading figures of the left wing and liberal activism in Egypt, who promoted an alternative form of political engagement on the eve of the revolution, had previously been affiliated with well-established political groups. This precisely outlines the transition that progressively occurred on the upper pole of the

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<sup>83</sup> Egyptian political scientists and human right activist elected in the 2012 Parliamentary elections, prominent figure of the 2011 revolution and founding member of the liberal Freedom Egypt Party.

discursive cycle, as it shows how institutional powers indirectly contributed to the emergence of a new form of political activism.

More specifically, this aspect of digital activism shows how those, who may be more likely to develop and disseminate a critical theory within the opposition share many characteristics of the elites in power, which puts them in a position of intellectual leadership. According to Mukhtar, a 40-something journalist and web activist, social media, amongst other kinds of political actions, was particularly representative of this form of *bourgeois public sphere* (Habermas, 1962):

Social media doesn't have a unique role by itself. Social media, by the end of the day is a reflection of the people, who are on social media. See the revolutionary camp wasn't – themselves - they weren't capable to address these slogans into a serious vision. (...) Most of the revolutionary camp, or the main figures of the revolutionary camp came somehow from middle class, (...) so while they want reform, they are part of the class that may be affected by the reform itself. So there was a moral contradiction. I realise that in April 2011. I told some people, "if you want to stop the revolution it's ok, but if you want to continue, you should know that your personal life will change, (...)" People weren't ready for this. (...) they were able to sacrifice they life, while they were not able to sacrifice their... [laugh] (Mukhtar, cf. Interview Transcripts: 63)

Admittedly, it should be said that, like many of the statements reported in this chapter, this quote is mostly representative of the views shared by the left-wing opposition. In this case the participant embraces a typically Marxist perspective as he claims that the left-wing intelligentsia was unable to be fully committed to the revolution. According to Mukhtar, digital activism essentially relayed the voices of pro-revolutionaries originating from the bourgeoisie. As such, it reflected the views of a privileged minority, within the opposition, that was somehow disconnected from the lower classes. In this quote, Mukhtar suggests that whereas many revolutionary thinkers or activists were ready to sacrifice their life for the revolutionary cause, - by facing the police, protesting in the streets and openly sharing their views on the military regime - they were however not ready to sacrifice their lifestyle. To some extent, his comment was revealing of the fact that after January 2011 the middle class had often failed at interacting with the working class.

Many middle class left-wing activists among the participants interviewed expressed their concern about the fact that they had failed at communicating their political message to the lower social classes. In spite of their desire to implement an alternative political programme for those in need, they felt the need to gain credit among the lower class.. Although they had benefitted from some form of intellectual leadership within the middle class, they could hardly communicate directly with the working poor and offer practical answers to people's everyday needs.

To a large extent, these observations further illustrate the intricacy of the relationship between political groups. The fact that young activists had been raised within or gravitated among the pro-military elite would constitute an obstacle to the revolution, in spite of their commitment. Just like an ideological and technological tools of the revolution, some of the individuals, who consolidated the opposition had operated a transition from the sphere of power to counter-power and vice versa.

To illustrate this idea, young left-wing activist Elias recalls the policy implemented by Gamal Mubarak in the early 2000s to improve the technological infrastructure of the public administration. In his opinion, many of Gamal Mubarak's projects led by the *Gil al Mustaqbal*<sup>84</sup> foundation had contributed to encourage citizen-led initiatives designed on participative media. Although such projects initially intended to improve public services, stimulate the economy and serve the interests of the regime, this had progressively provided the revolutionary opposition with technology savvy individuals willing to achieve efficient political reforms:

This kind of activities they were not intentionally political, but by time they attracted the youth and they became added value to this kind of new youth. And this new youth, who are creating a new strata in Egypt, like 20% at least escaped from it. You can imagine that this 20% from Gamal Mubarak project cooperated with what was left from the political sphere here in Egypt, to form a

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<sup>84</sup> The Future Generation

new phenomena and new social and political phenomena, starting 2005. They were not the leaders but they provided us with right calibers. Because actually our main problem, for whoever worked in politics in early 2005, is that there were really a huge gap between us and the [Watanya]<sup>85</sup> people, he trained the [Watanya] people to be closer to us<sup>86</sup>. (Elias, cf. Interview transcripts: 102)

What hypothetically constituted the intellectual elite of the online public sphere should not be regarded as entirely disconnected from the former regime. This is partly due to the fact that discourses remain, to a certain extent, fluid by nature, as they unfold in a cycle. As a result the distinction between power and counter-power – as well as the divisions between institutional politics and political activism – may sometimes be hardly noticeable.

### 9.6. Fluidity of the revolutionary discourse

With regards to the way the ideological vocabulary of the revolution had been applied in the post-revolutionary debate, interviews corroborated the findings of my blogosphere analysis. Participants commonly agreed on the fact that the revolutionary ideals had no consistent meaning, since they had been employed in different ideological contexts over the 2011-2013 political crisis.

For instance, some of the slogans that had been chanted by protestors in January 2011 became proper labels for specific political groups. Among others was the famous “Aish, al Hourya, Adla Ijtima’ya”<sup>87</sup> slogan which had found an echo in the Freedom and Justice party founded by the Muslim Brotherhood. Another example can be found in the claim for human *dignity* (Warkotsch, 2012: 44). This concept activated a different ideological repertoire as it resonated with the name of the party<sup>88</sup> founded by Hamdeen Sabahy in the 1990s. Therefore, although it participated to bring together different political groups as one of the leitmotifs of the revolution, it was also likely to speak to the left wing opposition in particular. In a similar way to what Bennett and Segerberg have described in their theory

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<sup>85</sup> National/nationalist, as a reference of the Mubarak’s former National Democratic Party (NDP)

<sup>86</sup> By “us”, the participant refers to the opposition.

<sup>87</sup> *Bread, freedom, social justice*

<sup>88</sup> *The Karama Party (Dignity party)*

of connective action (2012), every individual was able to personalise and interpret this vocabulary in a way that would reflect his ideological perspective.

In order to discuss this phenomenon, participants were asked to comment on the way this vocabulary had been applied in the post-revolutionary debate. This aspect of the interviews substantiated the observations I had made when analysing the constitutional debate. Indeed, many participants argued that the concepts of freedom, social justice or dignity were too vague to support a substantial political debate. Furthermore, in the context of the Egyptian uprisings, these terms did not relate to one specific political discourse:

I believe that a lot of the concepts and ideals used, because they were so vague – and that’s why they were popular, because they are vague and everyone can see something of themselves in it. You know if you say “freedom”, you know “freedom” is such a broad term, everyone can say “ I’m for freedom”. So of course, you can use those terms and you will be popular, you will get a following, but you have to realise that it’s only popular because it’s vague. And the more you go into details, the more you have a very specific program of what you want. (...) you know you can’t just say “freedom” what does it mean? You have to have a different policy, you have to advocate freedom in a certain way. So you can be still in charge of your political message, but then you have to realise that you’re paying for that in numbers. You’re paying for that and people won’t be behind you anymore, once they know exactly what you are advocating. (Samira, cf. Interview transcripts: 29)

It is worth mentioning that, this criticism was mainly formulated by 30 to 40 year old liberals, who, among the different participants interviewed, appeared to be particularly critical with regards to leftist pro-revolutionaries’ strategy. In their views, the vagueness or *flexibility* of this counter-discourse demonstrated revolutionaries’ failure to consolidate their followers around a consistent political program in the long run:

That’s where I draw a line between a revolution and a political campaign. Because those are very very broad aspects. You can’t really start to cut through those and start bring into planet earth, into actual laws and regulations that would actually make those something worthwhile. And that’s the biggest difference between what it takes to be a politician and what it takes to be a revolutionary. And I’d quote – his on and off my favourite writer every now and then depending on what he writes – Ibrahim ‘Issa, the writer. *The*

*revolution “tuhalaq fy sama a-thawra wa tamshy as-syassya ‘ala-l-ard’* so it’s basically *the revolution is hanging in the sky, while politics actually walks on the ground*. That’s the biggest difference, because those slogans can never be translated into anything. (Nabil, cf. Interview transcripts: 46)

This phenomenon had also contributed to the success of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the participants in question interpreted as the most problematic outcome of the 25<sup>th</sup> January uprisings. Most certainly, this observation involved underlining the weaknesses of the youth opposition. But first and foremost, it partly explains why political leadership had been so versatile in Egypt between 2011 and 2013 and why the debate remained highly polarised.

Over the course of the ethnography, I came to experience how the fluidity of the revolutionary discourse had sometimes affected my own understanding of the terminology commonly used in the literature to refer to the 2011 uprisings. Although the interviews were designed with the intent to bring participants to formulate their own definition of such concepts, their definition sometimes came to reveal and challenge my own assumptions. By the end of the fieldwork, I realised that the literature had affected my understating of the terms “revolutionaries”, “grassroots” or “liberals” as they were commonly used in the context of the Arab Spring.

Like my analysis of the 2012 constitutional debate, the ethnography revealed that the literature did not refer to the terms “democracy”, “civil” or “secular” in the way most Egyptians would commonly understand those concepts. Most of the literature published between 2011 and 2013 would often use the term “liberal” to refer to the opposition against the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet this terminology denied the divisions between the Marxist, left wing and economic liberal members of the opposition. Worst of all, it suggested that the so-called “liberals” had been entirely disconnected from Islamist movements in the early stage of the revolutionary mobilisation.

However, as it was very well expressed by participant Elias (Elias, cf. Interview transcripts: 97), many pioneers of the Egyptian revolutionary activism were originally

affiliated to Islamist movements. Unlike what the literature suggested by using this terminology, the opposition had never been homogenously secular. As argued earlier, the terms “secular” and “democratic”, were most commonly considered as very pejorative among the Egyptian population and could hardly be used as a political label in Egyptian politics. In fact, despite the fact that literature about the Arab Spring assumed that a secular democracy was the ultimate aspiration of the revolutionary youth, the opposition was not primarily concerned with the issue of democratisation (Lopes de Souza and Lipietz, 2011; Jomet, 2014).

Consequently, parties and political actors that constituted the alternative against Islamists and supporters of the SCAF, such as the Egyptian Bloc coalition and the National Salvation Front, were often qualified as “civil” parties. In this case, the term “civil” substituted itself to “secular” to designate opponents to the military regime and Muslim Brotherhood. Just like the literature had failed at expressing the nuances in the meaning of these terms, it had wrongly led me to believe, in the early stage of my research, that the political stance of young technologically literate revolutionaries was similar to that of the grassroots.

Participants however stressed the fact that, although international media and foreign commentators had paid particular attention to young middle class activists, their views was to be distinguished from that of the lower classes. Among the opposition, young urban activists were more likely to convey a vision of the revolution that would resonate with the way the international community envisioned the democratisation process. However, despite the fact that social media activists had made the opposition visible online on behalf of the grassroots and with the aim of relying their political demands, their ideological perspective remained significantly different. This was precisely the reason why, according to many participants, leftist revolutionaries failed at anticipating and preventing the success of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This further confirmed the argument, according to which intellectual leadership did not operate successfully over the months that followed the uprisings, preventing political

action from enacting a substantial critical theory. Similarly to the Habermasian model, it failed at producing a political program grounded on the practical needs of the working class, and only generated a new form of top-down communication flow. Not only was this criticism formulated against and within the activist community, but it was also raised to question the benefits of social media usage in the context of the revolutionary mobilisation.

As I will show, participants suggested that social media had constrained each political agenda within its own circle and precluded interactions between middle class revolutionaries and the lower class. Paradoxically, those who considered themselves as the voices of the people had contributed to the development of a new elitist communication framework.

### 9.7. The *mainstreaming* process: the bubble effect

In addition to the issues mentioned above, participants identified another consequence of digital activism, which specifically related to the process through which social media had evolved towards the *mainstream*. Like my sample from the blogosphere interviewees pointed that Internet had reached a critical mass of users within the middle class, who emerged in the debate without previous knowledge nor experience of politics. Consequently, their contributions indirectly affected the quality of this debate by erasing any form of intellectual leadership:

(...) there is a big phenomena happening on say virtual world and in fact, I can tell you that, it seems like most of Egyptians middle class, if I may classify them, just wake up one day and discover there is another life happening, so they jump in, trying to participate without any background of whatever. And we are in a time when people who don't speak at all start to speak all the time. People who have not been involved in political idea or any political activity or whatever, starting to jump in trying to whatever. And in fact they also have external players, who have discovered that there is a huge tool we may benefit from it, so everybody is trying to make it from their own benefit. So there is a big big big and huge in fact debate and talk and speaking mostly about politics and through the social media these days. (...) I guess after the whole mess start to settle down a little, we have to try to sit and put some rules

about how can we use this content, how can we deal with it. (Khalil, Interview Transcripts: 78)

Participants also criticised the fact that the increasing popularity of social media had contributed to compartmentalise the debate online. Despite the fact that a broader diversity of citizens became involved in this particular form of deliberation, they constituted distinctive audiences that hardly interacted with each other. In their opinion, this had emphasised the polarisation of the debate, preventing the opposition from reaching a consensus on the purpose of the revolution.

Those different interpretations of the revolution had been evolving separately, after digital media provided the platforms and communicative framework required to enable large-scale deliberation. The liberalisation of the debate online had created a bubble effect, increasing divisions and confusion among the Egyptian society. This phenomenon was perfectly illustrated by the story related by Khalil as he described to what extent the deliberations surrounding the presidential elections generated conflicts within family circles:

We have several cases of divorcing women [laugh] during the last three years over political arguments with their husbands. (...) Which is not a common practice in Egypt in fact. (...) because they have their own opinion about subjects, for the first time. And this is, got through the media. Mostly social media. So, ok, this lady is having her own closed group, which concentrates about the relatives, you know, the friends she knows in real life or here on Facebook. (...) so, she's having her own opinion and she's suddenly becoming a more and more believer of (...) Morsi. And her husband was sitting at a café with his friends and his seeking about the man of the army who will return the country to his feet and when he returns home, he finds his wife defending Morsi. (...) At the voting station he's telling her that she will go and give to Sissi the vote, and at the polling station she told him no "I will give to..." blablabla [laugh] and he's divorcing her in the polling station, you know. [laugh] (Khalil, cf. Interview transcripts: 85)

Comparatively, the early days of digital activism, during which revolutionaries benefitted from intellectual leadership had proved to be more efficient when consolidating a unified opposition. Indeed, when remembering the beginning of digital activism in the early 2000s,

participants described the first community of web activists as ideologically diversified yet very united:

(...) Abdel Fatah, he was a Muslim Brotherhood member and Amr Ezzat was a Salafist, Wael Abbas<sup>89</sup> was a radical liberal but this, I mean, although these kind of differences between them, they were close to each other even more than their origins, I mean, Amr Ezzat was closer to Wael Abbas more than being close to the Salafists. And this introduced this kind of collective power that is not controllable. They are not a political party, they don't need a kind of political permission from the government to work, they had this kind of connectivity that was more advanced than what the government used to trace them. (Elias, cf. Interview Transcripts: 97)

This sense of belonging to a united opposition was however shattered as soon as each of these different opinion leaders found their own specific audience on social media. Most participants spontaneously described the evolution of digital media activism by distinguishing the initial phase of the blogosphere, from a later stage characterised by the emergence of Facebook and Twitter.

Though only a very few bloggers were part of the activist community in 2007, they provided a sophisticated set of robust arguments supported by sources, evidences and quality journalistic investigations. Progressively, with the emergence of social media platforms, a lot of bloggers stopped writing blog posts to instead use Facebook and Twitter exclusively. This was confirmed to me by the press officer of a foreign embassy based in Cairo, who I met during the course of my fieldwork and who had been interacting with bloggers and activists on a regular basis (Cf. Interview Transcripts: 116).

With the emergence of social media, a more superficial form of discourse arose. This new form of communication was characterised by keywords and hashtag trends, which most probably facilitated sporadic campaigns but prevented users from developing a deep argumentation. For many participants this contributed to make the features of the revolutionary counter-discourse meaningless, as it was now relying on short statements,

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<sup>89</sup> Egyptian bloggers, famous among the activist community.

which would be easily disseminated but could hardly be embedded in a well-defined ideological argument:

Twitter for example, because Twitter is so limited, the amount of words you can write in one tweet, so you're, I mean for example, after January 2011 there were so many conversations on Twitter between people that were generally interested in politics blablabla, but the platform, you know does not allow you to go in depth in those issues (...) It's intended, or it's only use can be for very vague discussions that are very all for freedom, blablabla, you can't really go in that detailed policies or discussion about very specific issues that require numbers, you know, that require statistics, require, blablabla, (...) you can take one tweet out of context and it means something different. You don't have the space to literally; literally you don't have the space to write something that is comprehensive that is deep enough to be concrete. It's mostly vague. Also because you have so many people get into the discussions, so you're talking to one person, at a point, and then someone else joins the discussion and adds another point, and it becomes, really, really difficult to maintain a decent discussion, going on everything in it, because they are so many parties involved. (Samira, cf. Interview transcripts: 30)

In addition to the fact that social media had extended the debate to include a mainstream audience, it was designed in a way that hardly enabled any participant to set the context in which they conceptualised freedom or social equity. By simplifying the message, Twitter, for instance, had undeniably participated to make this ideological vocabulary more fluid, which might partly explain why Morsi's government attempt to actualise these concepts in constitutional law had failed.

#### **9.8. Monitoring and self-censorship: reconsidering the benefits of social media**

Finally and most importantly, participants pointed that the social media sphere was put under surveillance, which confirms the idea that the digital networks had progressively become an asset for the ruling elite. Two months prior to the fieldwork, the Interior Minister had announced his plan to apply mass surveillance over the most popular social media platforms and mobile phone applications, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube

and WhatsApp<sup>90</sup>. This had been mentioned several times by interviewees as one of the most problematic outcomes of increasing social media usage.

In their views, this indicated that cyberspace had reached the end of its mainstreaming as well as its institutionalisation process, as it was now comparable to traditional mass media. As much as broadcast media and the press, the Internet was now censored and used by leading political groups as well as the national security to spread rumours and discredit the opposition. Simultaneously, participants referred to another phenomenon, which had made any form of social media statement very likely to be manipulated in Egypt. This consisted in private agents - most commonly hired by the government, the army or any other political or corporate stakeholder – who would create fake accounts, incorporate a platform or join an online debate with the intent of promoting or distorting a specific narrative.

Such agents, referred to as “legion of the internet”<sup>91</sup> among the activist community, affected the audience’s perception of the public opinion and spread groundless rumours that equally affected the credibility of social media as an alternative communication tool. *Agenda setting* was now controlled by whoever benefitted from the resources and the infrastructure necessary to reverse a trend or change the dominant narrative. Additionally, the Interior Minister’s decision to monitor all social platform would lead to self-censorship.

Consequently, what had been initially used to circumvent censorship and provide an alternative source of information stimulated as much scepticism and criticism as the traditional mass media:

(...) now social media has been so corrupted, I could say, also because of the surveillance, I mean they have been getting like this, I don’t know like a multimillion contract with an American company to start surveying Facebook. So [activists] are aware of that and they wouldn’t start sharing their ideas or their fresh ideas on the revolution just like that on Facebook you know. (...) So

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<sup>90</sup> <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/egypt-s-attack-internet-privacy-tightens-noose-freedom-expression-2014-06-04> (Amnesty.org, 04/06/2014)

<sup>91</sup> *Electronic committees*

I think right now, everything changes. The activists wouldn't use it as naively as they did before. (Tariq, cf. Interview Transcripts: 20)

Over the course of the interviews, participants came to express their views on the benefits and the downfalls of social media activism in relation to the evolution of the political debate between 2011 and 2013. This aspect of the questionnaire confirmed the argument, according to which connective action partly explained the short-term success and long-term failure of the revolution. Similarly to what had already been stated in previous studies (Breuer, 2012), participants argued that the media had essentially contributed to stimulate public deliberations, by facilitating access to information. It constituted a considerable asset for people who did not benefit from the technological infrastructure but could connect to the Internet via internet cafes (Samira, cf. Interview transcripts: 31). The speed and immediacy of the communication was also mentioned as a considerable advantage of digital media, along with the fact that it enabled any user to connect with an international audience.

Among the participants recruited, Muna and Khalil, who respectively worked for a private television channel and for the online edition of a private newspaper, raised two different benefits of social media. According to Khalil, although this new communication channel might sometimes fail at producing a rational debate and raised polemics, it generated considerable social change and contributed to disseminate some form of knowledge:

Now if you look at regular (...) bus moving in Cairo streets you will find people who are opening they own mobile phone and read. Ok, they are read jokes, they are read rubbish, they are read whatever but they are read (...) and this is knowledge, regardless of how shallow it is (...) (Khalil, cf. Interview transcripts: 86)

Muna, on the other hand, argued that, from a journalistic point of view, participative media extended the amount of information available in the public space. However this advantage was considerably diminished by the fact that the overwhelming quantity of information now available online somehow affected its quality, as it made it extremely hard to filter and verify. This idea was also expressed by Nadim, a political activists, publishing articles for independent news websites and newspapers:

I think we cannot completely flip the table and work with direct democracy, I think in the end you always turn into representative democracy one way or another. Until you...Until maybe, I don't know. I don't know how direct democracy can address the problem of quantity versus quality, I don't know how. They say "more quantity brings quality" I don't know about that. (Nadim, cf. Interview Transcripts: 40)

Participant Mukhtar pointed that what could be regarded as an advantage of social media activism in some cases would turn out to be a downfall in other cases (Mukhtar). In particular, informants suggested that, due to the fact that digital media remained a free and unregulated space, nothing could be hidden. All kind of arguments and assumptions could easily gain legitimacy. Thanks to the convergence of the private and the public spheres, personal conflicts of interests would easily seep in public deliberations affecting people's judgement:

(...) lot's of followers for example, they can say things that are untrue and it spreads like wild fire they can ruin reputations, (...) whenever you have activists and political players, you have big egos, you have interpersonal discussions and problems, that are not necessarily political, but personal purely, and this makes it a tool, which can be abused very easily, once you have a twitter account, you have like a hundred thousand followers, you know you can start a campaign against someone, you can almost blackmail (...) people believe you because you are an activist who has a name, who's very popular, and people believe you, regardless of evidence, so it might actually weaken the critical thinking of people, because it's so accessible, it's so easy and a lot of people, it's much easier for example for people to learn the news via twitter than to actually go and research themselves, so you know they take the easy way, so it's easy and it's a good thing, but t's also a bad thing, in that sense. (Samira, cf. Interview transcripts: 31)

Finally, another recurrent disadvantage was described as "the bubble effect" (Farid, cf. Interview transcripts: 89; Samira, cf. Interview transcripts: 31), the fact that social media activism had indirectly stopped the activist community from interacting with the lower class. As mentioned earlier, the activist community had failed at efficiently communicating with the grassroots, due to the fact that the debate had progressively been compartmentalised on social media. Admittedly, digital devices gave the opportunity to a

broader spectrum of perspectives to be expressed, but each of these perspectives had only been debated with its own social and ideological *bubble*.

Overall, the fact that participants spontaneously drew a relationship between the advantages and disadvantages of the media confirms the hypothesis, according to which the Egyptian online public sphere followed a cyclical evolutionary path. But most importantly, these findings indicate that middle class activists were surprisingly critical about its liberalisation. Although most of them advocated freedom of speech and the rights of the working class, they regarded the liberalisation of the debate – and the mainstreaming of the revolution - as problematic phenomenon, most certainly because this meant compromising intellectual leadership.

They recalled the earlier stage of digital activism as the environment, which had been the most appropriate to the development of a critical theory and the most favourable to the confrontation of different ideological perspectives.

Yet when considering alternative forms of political expression, most participants argued that the activist community would now need to practically interact with the grassroots. Since its creation, the revolutionary agenda always meant to relay the demands of the working class. Yet although participative media had provided a few middle class revolutionaries with the opportunity to publically share critical opinion, it had deviated them from their initial purpose.

To a large extent, this category of the middle class genuinely intended to raise awareness about the needs of the working class. Yet paradoxically, they had only felt empowered to do so, when revolutionary activism was in its early stage and as they benefitted from intellectual leadership. Now that digital media had visibly become similar to mainstream media, pro-revolutionary activists started considering alternative forms of political engagement. In light of the experience of the 2011 revolution, efficient political action could only be achieved by interacting directly with the working class or restoring the conditions for intellectual leadership. Evidence of that was found, as participants were

asked their views on what potential alternative form of communication could be more successful in promoting one's political message.

### **9.9. Returning to institutional politics or grass-roots political action**

When asked about what kind of alternative communication channel could be used to develop a successful and consistent political agenda, interviewees proposed two different approaches. These alternative political strategies resonated well with the division I suggested between anarchist and political revolutionaries. Overall, four participants responded that it was hardly possible for the opposition to develop any other communication strategy. Yasmeeen, an NGO activist using social media campaigning, and Khalil, the editor of an online news portal, claimed that no alternative communication channel could be used to compete with the dominant political actors now represented on the cyberspace. Two other interviewees affirmed that whether on social media or elsewhere, no alternative political discourse could ever be expressed in the repressive environment that Egypt was currently facing.

Yet apart from the four reactions mentioned above, a first group argued that no consistent political discourse could ever be successful without an institutional form of politics. The traditional form of political organisation should substitute itself to fluid sporadic campaigns and to what Bennett and Segerberg conceptualised as connective action (2012):

Me, personally, I think people should engage in more institutional form of political parties. That's one form of engagement that I think people should stress on a little bit. (...) I don't think they can immediately do that but I think on the long run, the best form to support direct democracy or support institutions is to have a backbone of institutional bodies, political parties or syndicates, or unions, if you have such a backbone, then social movements, I think, would be benefitted a lot. (Nadim, cf. Interview transcripts: 41)

Surprisingly, this can also be interpreted as an attempt to recover the intellectual leadership that opposition activists benefitted from, when participative media were only used by a small community of critical thinkers. In participants' terms, producing a new institutional discourse would potentially enable revolutionaries to regain the legitimacy and credibility

they had progressively lost, as social media became part of the mainstream. Furthermore, although this was only implicitly suggested by the interviewees, one can assume that institutional politics was now considered as a way to produce a consistent ideological framework for the opposition.

In the second case, interviewees answered that a successful alternative to participative media could be found in face-to-face interactions with citizens. Yet this responded to another concern of the activist community: understanding and relaying the needs and perspective of the lower classes by using a *real* and effective bottom-up communication strategy:

I think we need to go much more toward the hardware, we were too much with the software but these ideas, these debates, these initiatives needed to go down on the streets, they needed to be more engaging to the general grass-roots, who are mainly not internet users, or even if they are internet users that not entirely engaged in the design process of these initiatives, so we needed this hardware engagement and we did not have it. Political organisation if you can say. Political social organisation to be clear actually (Zakaria, cf. Interview transcripts: 7)

Similar views were expressed, as interviewees were asked to what extent social media enabled to remain in control of one's political message. When answering to this question, most participants reemphasised the high likelihood of seeing one's comment distorted and misinterpreted. As it was formulated by Mukhtar, a social media activist, participative media consisted in a "free space" (Interview with Mukhtar, cf. Interview transcripts: 66). As such it enabled him to write more creatively, with no self-censorship nor concern about the politically correct stance. In other words, the benefit of the digital activism was precisely to *remain out of control*. His perspective, in that sense, reflected that of those revolutionaries, who had remained ontologically anarchists and would rather keep producing a counter-discourse rather than elaborating a new institutional framework.

Alternatively, the majority of interviewees manifested scepticism and argued, once again, that only a strong institutional identity would help in ensuring a sustainable political message on social media. Amir, a 40-something liberal editorials writer, drew an

interesting distinction between individuals and institutional users, implying that individuals had not as much control over the debate as institutions:

*- Do you think its is possible to remain in control of your political message when using something like social media?*

- It depends, if you talk about individuals then no. Unless you are very responsible and then you wouldn't need to show...If you are an institution and you are running it the same way that traditional media is done, maybe, but then it wouldn't be social media as you know. It would be just another medium for a similar process so...(Amir, cf. Interview transcripts: 111)

Younger interviewees regularly applying social media to promote their own activities asserted that one's political message could be controlled through participative media as individuals are always free to rectify misunderstandings. By doing so, they implied that it was activists' responsibility to anticipate and prevent the almost inevitable distortion of their statements.

For instance, cyber-activist Yasmeen had developed a technique intended to refute any statement posted on her behalf on social media and context any inaccurate quotations of her work (Yasmeen, cf. Interview transcripts: 12). This involved tracking all allegations and responding by uploading print-screens of her former posts. Such example highlighted to what extent this new era of cyber-activism would require foresight and long-term vision, as well as an awareness of the different political agenda competing online. As such, it constituted one step forward towards a more strategic and less spontaneous form of politics.

### 9.10. Connectivity, artificial counter-discourse and the sustainability issue

Overall, when analysing the evolution of the post-revolutionary debate in relation with social media usage, participants implied that connective action – in Bennett and Segerberg’s terms (2012) - could not lead to any substantial political change. Though it had proved to consolidate diffuse mobilisations in the past, its impact was considerably diminished by the current polarisation of the political environment. In this case again, participants claimed that the experience had led them to consider a rather traditional form of representation. They expressed the urge of finding entirely *new tools* (Nadim, cf. Interview transcripts: 39) or developing new trends and practices for the future generation of cyber-activism (Yasmeen, cf. Interview transcripts: 12).

But most importantly, the immediacy of the communication had made revolutionaries victims of their own success. This had led them to overestimate the popularity of their political message among the broader population and created an illusion of social cohesion. By doing so, it had stopped them from anticipating the return of leading political groups on the political scene. As a result, they had become aware of the need to constantly ensure the consistency (sustainability) of their discourse and invest in the content rather than the medium of their political message:

I think that the most important thing that [revolutionaries] should have learned, was basically to make a distinction, between an impression and an opinion and the communication’s message, these are three different things. And the fact that the immediacy of social media has mixed this up together (...) And this is why I say that they haven’t learned anything. It’s because they still believe that the real problem that they are facing is censorship. That they are not allowed to speak directly to the people. But that’s not the case, I mean, if you are a revolutionary activist, today, and if we decided to have a person, that we give them revolutionary items, we put him on Tahrir Square, and hold a public referendum on whether this person should be executed, I assure you that the majority of Egyptians would vote for that [laugh]. Just for the sake of seeing someone being executed that is involved with the revolution. That’s a failure and that’s primarily a failure of communication. (Amir, cf. Interview transcript: 101)

In other words, the artificial features of the discourse - the labels and slogans – had been disseminated before its actual meaning and its ideological framework could take shape. The form of discourses was now circulating faster than its content and before the critical theory and ideology that could have consolidated this movement had even emerged. This was the reason why these labels and slogans appeared to have no meaning and to have served different agendas.

Left wing and liberal Egyptian activists were facing a phenomenon, which was comparable to the economic bubble that the pioneers of the digital industry had experienced in the 1990s. Yet in their case, it was the success of the political debate, which had been growing too fast to be sustained and beneficial to its first investors.

Consequently, young revolutionaries like Mehdi, who was the most radical opponent to the regime that I met during my fieldwork and most probably the less likely to compromise, were now considering negotiation:

I'd change the way we did politics, we didn't want to make any compromises, we wanted all our galls to be true in just a matter of one year, I think there's two main mistakes that we made. The first one was, after *Mohammed Mahmoud*<sup>92</sup>, we were powerful, much powerful, we could just call who ever we wanted prime minister and he would come. But we didn't, this is one big mistake. The other one 30<sup>th</sup> June, cause we went on the street with the counter-revolution. We must have gone in the streets alone, not with the counter-revolution. [Laugh] (Mehdi, cf. Interview transcripts: 72)

When referring to “the way we did politics” Mehdi described a political agenda designed on a day-to-day basis, with no long-term vision. The revolutionary community was acting with the immediacy of digital media and had proved to be unprepared for the opportunities that the fall of Mubarak's regime had unleashed. As a result it had failed at developing the strong ideological foundations that previous revolutionary movements over history had to rely on, before introducing a new range of power institutions.

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<sup>92</sup> Reference to the clashes that took place in November 2011 between young revolutionaries and the police in the *Mohammed Mahmoud* street, which leads to Tahrir Square.

This was precisely the reason why many thinkers come to question whether or not the 2011 uprisings should be referred to as a revolution (Farah, 2012; Stein, 2012). Not only had they failed in establishing a new regime after the 30<sup>th</sup> June 2013 coup d'état, but it had also failed in spreading one unique and unifying revolutionary ideology. In fact, as opposed to the way the discursive cycle had always operated over history, the 2011 uprisings had not really substituted one dominant discourse for another.

Instead of developing a new institutional power on the basis of the revolutionary ideology per se, the uprisings had indirectly reinforced the military regime. Yet unlike other forms of post-revolutionary states such as the Jacobin or communist dictatorships, the counter-revolution had gained legitimacy from the artificial features rather than from the substantial essence of the revolution. Indeed, it would essentially rely on the distortion of the revolutionary vocabulary as well as on a transposition of the symbols that helped in consolidating the 2011 protests.

This process was however by most participants as a direct consequence of connectivity. Indeed, the fact that the revolution had remain superficial and did not manage to substitute one ideological framework for another was partly due to the immediacy and chaotic nature of participative media. Connectivity, in that sense, had not specifically emphasised the process, through which discourse, power and identities would be renegotiated according to the natural circulation of discourse. Rather, it had made this process less efficient by accelerating it, rendering counter-discourse artificial. As a result, intuitional powers and dominant discourses were less likely to be challenged, despite the fact that emergent practices would spread more rapidly.

### **9.11. Conclusion to empirical analysis 4: a superficial revolution**

In conclusion, although it intended to contextualise digital media activism in the offline socio-political environment, the ethnography confirmed the analyses I had conducted on the online data sets. As it appeared, most participants commonly agreed with the idea that both the symbolic and technological tools originally applied to spread the revolutionary message had been hijacked. Furthermore, similarly to what the blogosphere indicated, participants distinguished two phenomena that might have contributed to the failure of the revolution in the long run. Those were comparable to what I had identified earlier as the mainstreaming and institutionalisation of the revolution.

In addition, all participants, regardless of their age or political background, appeared to be rather critical with regards to the way social media had opened access to the political debate shortly after the 2011 uprisings. This particular communication strategy was indeed revealing of the reasons why the left-wing and liberal opposition had failed. Revolutionaries had been mistaken in thinking that their audience had embraced the revolutionary message and had not achieved to consolidate a substantial ideological message. Yet this was partly due to the fact that social media had become increasingly popular and contributed to democratise the debate before revolutionaries had established strong ideological foundations for their cause.

In participants' terms and in spite of what the bias of technological determinism had led many social scientists to believe, connectivity had not participated to the success but to the failure of the revolution.

To some extent, like in every revolution, the 2011 uprisings was meant to initiate a debate on the meaning of freedom, social equity, dignity and democracy, while confronting different ideological perspectives. Discussing and renegotiating the meaning of those concepts was necessary to stimulate a critical public sphere and generate a sense of citizenship. Indeed, one could easily argue revolutions, by nature, intend to make discourse more fluid in order to successfully complete a transition of power and substitute one institutional discourse for another. This is precisely the reason why one may easily be

mistaken in thinking that a fluid discourse systematically creates favourable conditions for democratisation. In fact, the circulation of power - only requires discourse to be fluid up to a certain extent.

Likewise, periods of revolution and political transition have always made political debate more polarised. On one hand, those generate intense tensions between the institutions in power and the emerging ideology. On the other hand, revolutions may also lead to a division between those, who remain primarily driven by critical theory (anarchists) and those, who enter into the sphere of institutional politics, enacting theory into practice (political revolutionaries). Each of these political actors comes to reconsider his perception of the revolutionary discourse as soon as it is being debated in the sphere of institutional politics, so as to evolve towards a new form of institutional power. In this regard, the conflicts that occurred both within and without the left wing and liberal opposition are similar to what revolutionaries have experienced in other cases of political crisis over history.

However, one of the particularities of the Egyptian uprisings lies in the fact that connectivity emphasised the fluidity of discourse, to the point that it jeopardised the transition of power. Indeed, connectivity had accelerated the evolution of counter-discourse – as described in my model of discursive cycle. In doing so, it had deprived the opposition of intellectual leadership too soon for it to produce a consistent critical theory. When revolutionaries drew the attention of the masses in 2011, this critical theory was still under construction. It was being elaborated by those, among the middle class, who navigated between different social and political circles and benefitted from the intellectual and material recourses needed to potentially produce a reliable ideological framework for the opposition. Connectivity contributed to interrupt this process, by accelerating the passage from critical theory to revolutionary action. However, this revolutionary action could only rely on a range of superficial concepts that would be easily be distorted by the leading political forces.

Meanwhile, many revolutionary activists desperately attempted to reproduce the conditions for intellectual leadership on social media. Yet this led to confine different audiences, while generating an illusion of consensus. Whereas they benefitted from a position of mediator between the working and the middle class, revolutionaries expressed the feeling of being progressively disconnected from the grassroots and losing control over the narrative of the revolution.

## **10. Conclusion: the doping metaphor**

When thinking about connectivity in terms of the way different ideologies succeed one another, one may describe this phenomenon as doping. Thanks to digital media, emerging counter-discourses are more likely to reach the mainstream and to ultimately be debated in the sphere of institutional politics. Under the connectivity paradigm, counter-discourses are almost enacted in political practice as soon as they emerge. In the short term, this phenomenon may be interpreted as the sign of a more democratic debate, given that more individuals become involved in the consolidation of a counter-discourse in its early stage. Furthermore, one may regard counter-discourses, in the connective age, as more efficient, because they easily stimulate visible forms of political engagement, while gathering a broader range of supporters (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

In this regard, connectivity acts like a kind of performance enhancing drug for counter-power. By making discourse more fluid, it accelerates the transition from emergent to mainstream, making counter-power more successful in the short run. However like any performance-enhancing drug, connectivity leads to critical side effects, which alter the success of counter-power in the long run.

Connective action, indeed, relies on a highly fluid, hence superficial, ideological vocabulary, which can be easily adapted to serve any political argument. Admittedly, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) demonstrated earlier, such forms of political engagement are more inclusive than traditional institutional structures. They allow every single individual to project herself in the political message of the network, as well as to reframe and personalise it in a way that reflects her particular perspective.

In a highly polarised political environment, this becomes problematic, since every political camp – including the institutions already in power – is likely to claim ownership of this emerging discourse. A fortiori, on the scale of a revolution, connectivity tends to dissolve and dismantle counter-power by enhancing the polarisation that comes along the revolutionary process. At first, it creates an illusion of consensus, which misleads the

opposition in thinking that its political message has been fully understood and absorbed by the grassroots.

This illusion of consensus is detrimental, all the more so as it raises the legitimacy of those who will ultimately claim ownership of the counter-discourse. Secondly, it prevents members of the opposition – and those who may have consolidated a critical theory – from recovering intellectual leadership. That is to say that, leaders of the opposition and critical thinkers, who would be the first to witness the distortion of counter-discourse, are no longer able to act as a mediator between the grassroots and the political elites. Moreover, they are no longer able to clarify and rectify the primary meaning of their political message.

### **10.1. Connectivity: the case of the 2011 Arab uprisings**

As this research demonstrates, the case of 2011 Egyptian uprisings and some aspects of the 2011 Tunisian revolution perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. In its early stage, digital activism certainly contributed to spread the revolutionary message. On one hand, it consolidated a community of critical thinkers from different ideological perspectives (left wing, liberal, conservative) and helped them formulate a counter-discourse that would reflect the demands of the working class. On the other hand, it enabled to relay this alternative political voice to the middle class and the international community.

In the initial phase, digital activism also contributed to put revolutionary activists in a position of intellectual leadership, since they were a minority to be using the Internet as a means for political deliberation. This partly explains why social media has been initially interpreted as a significant factor of democratisation, as foreign governments and international media commented on the events in early 2011.

The other reason, on which I will expand later in this chapter, lies in the fact that today's prevailing conception of democracy, which is conveyed by Western neoliberal governments, is often technologically determined. In line with what Adorno and

Horkheimer (2002) anticipated in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, technological development – as much as scientific progress in general – is regarded as a source of empowerment, especially when it benefits economic neoliberalism.

However, the Egyptian case shows that digital activism also contributed to prevent substantial political change to occur. Paradoxically, by liberalising access to political debate, social media eliminated the conditions for intellectual leadership, while allowing anyone to reshape the narrative of the revolution. Simultaneously, it propelled the revolutionary counter-power into the sphere of institutional politics before it could rely on a sustainable critical theory.

Ultimately, digital activism had become a visible threat to the political elites. Due to its unexpected success in mobilising protestors in January 2011, it would now be monitored and incorporated as a tool for political propaganda, while being actively used to discredit the revolutionary opposition.

Those were precisely the side effects of digital activism and the reasons why pro-revolutionaries were now seeking alternative forms of political engagement that would enable them to recover intellectual leadership. Three years after the revolution, they felt the need to return to a more traditional type of political communication.

## **10.2. Answering the question of sustainability**

Studying the effects of connective action over the months that followed the 2011 Egyptian uprisings provides answers to what Bennett and Segerberg formulated as the question of “sustainability and effect” (2012). In order to outline those answers, I will now refer back to my discursive cycle model. As I suggested in my theoretical framework, discourses have historically undertaken a cyclical evolution. In order to successfully challenge the dominant ideology, counter-discourses emerge both within the public sphere (Habermas, 1962) and in the margins of civil society, such as in the private sphere (Fraser, 1990). This

evolution occurs in the first half of the discursive cycle, which outlines the transition from critical theory to political practice.

Over time, these counter-discourses gain recognition and potentially consolidate a critical opposition, progressively evolving into another form of institutional discourse. Admittedly, this implies that counter-discourses are meant to establish another dominant ideology, which engenders new relationships of domination. Nevertheless, this cycle ensures the renewal of the ideological framework, on which societies are structured and according to which all sorts of power institutions assure their legitimacy over history. In this regard, the circulation of discourse also ensures the renewal of the elites in power. On the basis of this model, every new institutional discourse is instituted by a new generation of political actors. As soon as this transition becomes effective, visible and sustainable, one may describe it as a successful revolution.

Yet under the connectivity paradigm, the circulation of discourse in the first half of the discursive cycle is precipitated. Counter-discourses easily reach a mass – or mainstream – audience and are rapidly enacted into political practice. This is mainly due to the fact that counter-discourses become more fluid, which means they hardly evolve into a sustainable ideological power. Alternatively, they can be distorted or incorporated by the pre-established institutional discourse to serve the elites that are already in power.

Because of the fact that counter-discourses are no longer sustainable under the connectivity paradigm, they prevent the renewal of power that is meant to happen at the lower pole of the discursive cycle. In order to further exemplify this phenomenon, I will now answer to my three research questions.

1. Did the symbolic and technological tools designed by pro-revolutionaries benefit the leading political forces over the months that followed the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt?

This particular research question intends to reconsider the assumption, according to which digital technologies acted as a factor of democratisation. Further, it brings us to consider the hypothesis that the political crisis following the 2011 events reveals a vulnerability intrinsic to emergent forms of political activism.

Each of my four empirical chapters demonstrate that both the symbolic and technological tools originally used by pro-revolutionaries benefitted the counter-revolution.

In fact, the analysis conducted on a sample from the blogosphere and the fieldwork ethnography provide similar findings, since they approach this question from the perspective of revolutionary activists. Both data sets revealed that pro-revolutionaries witnessed an evolution in the way most of the issues raised by the opposition had been relayed by the military elite and the Muslim Brotherhood. In Tunisia, bloggers saw other long-established political parties and organisations, such as the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and Ennahdha, apply the same communication strategies as those developed by the youth opposition in 2011. Like the participants interviewed in Egypt, Tunisian bloggers also observed the fact that institutional political players and campaigners had become visible in the social media sphere. In Egypt, social media was not only used as tool for campaigning, but could now be applied to track and discredit members of the opposition or as a form of propaganda, thanks to private agents working for different political camp (“legion electrony”).

As for the symbolic tools of the revolution, both Tunisian and Egyptian web activists agreed that the terms that consolidated the opposition – such as “revolution”, “freedom”, “dignity”, or “equity” – had been incorporated into the discourse of the leading political organisations. By joining the debate on social media, official political players articulated different interpretations of those concepts, which relied on their specific political programme.

Evidence of this was found when analysing presidential candidates' usage of social media Twitter during the 2012 election, as outlined in my second empirical chapter. Combining data visualisation and qualitative discourse analysis revealed that, despite its low penetration rate, this digital media had, indeed, been as beneficial to the military elite as to the left-wing opposition. When comparing candidates Ahmad Shafiq's and Hamdeen Sabahy's Twitter campaign, one may identify the transition that Internet operated from *emerging* to *mainstream* media, and understand how those two aspects coexisted during the presidential race.

Although the two candidates proved to be significantly active and visible on Twitter, Ahmad Shafiq's tweets intended to relay his official statements and appearances on mainstream media. As such, they were part of a large and institutional campaigning infrastructure. Alternatively, Hamdeen Sabahy applied Twitter in a way that was more revealing of pro-revolutionaries' social media usage, to deliver a more personalised political message. This illustrates to what extent Twitter was simultaneously applied as an emerging and rather institutionalised form of political communication at the time of 2012 presidential race. At this stage of the political crisis, the technological tools originally applied by the revolutionary opposition were just as profitable to those, who remained in control of traditional mass media and enjoyed a high level of exposure.

Besides, as argued in my second empirical chapter, incorporating the social media sphere enabled pro-militaries to promote a perspective of the notion of freedom and social equity, which was opposed to that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamdeen Sabahy, on the other hand, conveyed a vision of freedom that resonated with pro-revolutionaries' concern for freedom of speech. In that sense, my Twitter data set also demonstrated how the symbolic tools of the revolution served the elite in power. My third empirical chapter corroborated these findings by showing how the concepts that had supported the revolutionary discourse still conveyed conflicting political arguments in the context of the 2012 constitutional debate.

2. To what extent was the 2011-2013 post-revolutionary debate representative of the way emerging counter-discourses progressively gain legitimacy in periods of revolution?

Exploring this question actually requires assessing to what extent the Tunisian and Egyptian case studies relate to the model of a discursive cycle, through which counter-discourse turns into the new institutional discourse. In other words, it introduces a reflection on the way connectivity affects the balance between power and counter-power.

As argued above, my research establishes that the debates surrounding the 2011-2013 political transition in Tunisia, and most particularly in Egypt, did not entirely conform to the discursive cycle.

Admittedly, both the blogosphere and the ethnography showed that, cyber-activists benefitted from a position of intellectual leadership prior to the 2011 uprisings. Yet these empirical analyses also suggest that, with the decrease of digital divide and the fact that social media reached a more diversified audience, Internet was no longer different from mainstream media. Its public was indeed more representative of the mass media audience, which was more exposed to dominant narratives and more receptive to the arguments of the leading political forces.

In the absence of intellectual leadership, bloggers and political activists in general felt deprived of intellectual leadership, which led them to keep interacting within restricted circles of followers. Yet this generated what interview participants and bloggers described as a *bubble effect* (cf. Interview transcripts: 31, 89; cf. blogosphere data set, Ref. 70) by isolating them while disconnecting them from the grassroots.

Therefore, in the long run, digital activism contributed to dissolve intellectual leadership and to separate critical theory from political practice. In that respect, it defeated the natural circulation of discourse and did not provide the conditions for a successful revolution to occur. Indeed, my model of discursive cycle proposes that critical theory, which I relate to Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, and political practice that can be understood in

relation to Fraser's critique, come together to produce a powerful counter-discourse. This was precisely not the case in the context of the Egyptian and Tunisian post-revolutionary debates.

My second and third empirical chapters also answer to this research question by exemplifying the process through which the ideological vocabulary of the revolution became institutionalised (*institutionalisation of the revolution*). Both my Twitter analysis and the data set extracted from the Dostour Sharek platform show how the issues raised by the opposition have been incorporated by the institutions in power – both the military elite and the Muslim Brotherhood – to restore their legitimacy.

This proves that the transition of power that should have occurred in the lower pole of the discursive cycle did not operate and that counter-discourse was only used to reinforce pre-established institutional discourse.

3. What was the role of social media and digital activism in enhancing the *fluidity* of the revolutionary discourse over the months that followed the 2011 revolutions?

The third of my research questions shall bring me to address the sustainability issue and determine whether *fluid* counter-discourse can be as successful over time as on the long run.

Like participant Samira suggested when referring to Twitter in particular, social media contributed to compress and label the political message. This originally facilitated the spread of the revolution, making it appealing to a broader public. However, in Samira's terms, this ultimately contributed to make the vocabulary that surrounded the revolution vague and hardly applicable on the basis of a specific political programme.

My third empirical analysis is particularly revealing of this phenomenon. The sample of comments extracted from the Dostour Sharek platform shows that the concepts inherited from the revolution were still highly misleading in the context of the 2012 constitutional referendum. This partly explains why Morsi's constitutional draft failed at materialising

those concepts in the legislation process and generated the tensions that led to the 2013 coup d'état.

Initially, because these concepts allowed different interpretations and could be adapted according to one's ideological perspective, they initially helped in conferring a sense of consensus. This partly explains why the statistics computed by the Dostour Sharek platform indicated a majority of "likes" and the draft constitution was approved with over 60% of votes. However, as argued in my third empirical chapter, the constitutional debate was more *intertextual* than it was *interactive*. As such, it concealed divergences of opinions instead of confronting them, which only emphasised polarisation, creating the conditions for 2013 military coup. As a result, Morsi's government had followed a similar evolution to that of the left-wing and liberal opposition in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings.

*Fluid* discourses may also be explained by the way public deliberations are designed on such social platforms. For instance, analysing the comments posted on the Dostour Sharek portal qualitatively revealed that citizens were more critical of the constitutional draft than what the number of "likes" suggested. The project was designed to be consultative rather than deliberative. As such, it did not stimulate a high level of interaction between participants. Therefore, overall, this research clearly indicates that social media significantly enhanced the fluidity of discourse, which partly explains the failure of the revolution.

### **10.3. Rethinking the relationship between democracy and technology**

Overall, my research demystifies the assumption, according to which digital activism unleashed or facilitated the democratisation process. In fact, similarly to what Jodi Dean suggested in her critique of communicative capitalism (2003), it suggests that social media provided an illusion of critical deliberation, which only reinforced the legitimacy of the leading political forces over time.

And yet the 2011 uprisings were often interpreted by the media and across the literature (Breuer 2011; Castells, 2012) as evidence of how technology might improve freedom of expression and create the conditions for a more democratic political environment. This can be explained by the fact that democratisation – as it was shaped by the historical experience of the Enlightenment and as it is conceptualised today in neoliberal democracies - is often regarded as driven by scientific and technological progress. Yet as this research leads us to think, this perspective on democratisation is biased and misleading for two reasons.

First, it relies on a very Eurocentric conception of the democratic debate, according to which any attempt to liberalise the political debate systematically produces a more egalitarian society, by providing every citizen with the chance to shape public opinion. Such perception is most likely to be determined by the legacy of Enlightenment (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002) and the way industrialised and neoliberal societies framed the memory of the Enlightenment over time.

Second, a vision of democracy, which partly relies on technological determinism, contributes to build what Jodi Dean referred to as a sort of neodemocracy (2003). Such an approach conveys the assumption that technological progress stimulates political change for the best, by ensuring individuals' empowerment. To some extent, Habermas' public sphere (1962) formulates a similar hypothesis, since it argues that the liberalisation of discourse that occurred in the context of the Enlightenment paved the way for a more critical and democratic debate. Accordingly, both technology and democracy are understood as a progression and the signs of a positive and on-going evolution, although they stimulate complex interplays between power and counter-power, which can be interpreted in very different ways. By liberalising discourse and opening access to public debate, democracy and technology trigger delicate tensions between discourse and counter-discourse that directly impact on the renewal of power as well as of the ideology that sustains it. In view of this, conceptualising the bourgeois public sphere in a more holistic model – such as the cycle of discourse - shows how the equilibrium between discourse and counter-discourse can easily be disturbed, so as to legitimise well-established powers.

Similarly to what Jodi Dean argues when considering the public sphere in the age of communicative capitalism (2003) my research shows that connectivity contributes to generate an illusion of consensus, which does not comply with the Habermasian definition of a critical deliberation. For this reason, I believe that building theory on connectivity and exploring how this paradigm affects the sustainability of counter-discourses shall help to rethink both technology and democracy as part of a cyclical rather than a linear evolution. Inevitably, this also requires reconsidering one's expectations with regards to the democratisation as well as the technological modernisation of the MENA region.

## 11. Appendices:

<i>Blogosphere sample: Hyperlinks</i> .....	245
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 1 to 24</i> .....	246
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 25 to 45</i> .....	247
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 46 to 66</i> .....	248
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 67 to 87</i> .....	249
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 88 to 100</i> .....	250
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 101 to 121</i> .....	251
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 121 to 144</i> .....	252
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 145 to 170</i> .....	253
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 171 to 194</i> .....	254
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 195 to 223</i> .....	255
<i>List of Blog Posts Sampled: References 224 to 243</i> .....	256
<i>Summary of the data set sampled from the R-Sheif Database:</i> .....	257
<i>Overview of Hamdeen Sabahy Twitter campaign:</i> .....	258
<i>Overview of Ahmad Shafiq’s Twitter campaign:</i> .....	259
<i>Overview of Amru Mussa’s Twitter campaign: April 2012</i> .....	260
<i>Overview of Amru Mussa’s Twitter campaign: May 2012</i> .....	261
<i>Overview of Abu al Futuh’s Twitter campaign: April 2012</i> .....	262
<i>Overview of Abu al Futuh’s Twitter campaign: May 2012</i> .....	263
<i>Sources selected to identify the visibility of the 5 leading candidates across the NexisLexis database:</i> .....	264
<i>Overview of the comments sampled from the “Dostour Sharek” e-consultation platform: Comments 1 to 15</i> .....	265
<i>Overview of the comments sampled from the “Dostour Sharek” e-consultation platform: Comments 16 to 30</i> .....	266
<i>Overview of the comments available from the “Dostour Sharek” archive:</i> .....	267
<i>List of Recurrent Topics identified for every draft constitutional article (Egypt, 2012): Article 1 to 10</i> .....	268
<i>List of Recurrent Topics identified for every draft constitutional article (Egypt, 2012): Article 11 to 20</i> .....	269
<i>List of Recurrent Topics identified for every draft constitutional article (Egypt, 2012): Article 21 to 30</i> .....	270