

Networked Social Movements in Tunisia: Organizational and Media Alternative or a Threat to the Social Order?

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Abstract

This article examines networked social movements in Tunisia as a new form of mobilization, emerging from declining youth trust in traditional institutions and the rise of digital technologies. These movements helped break the monopoly of state media during the revolution and contributed to the fall of the Ben Ali regime. Their influence continued during the transitional phase, especially in the 2019 elections, by supporting non-traditional candidates and strengthening grassroots oversight. Characterized by fluid identities and rapid, issue-based engagement, they promote participation but also risk undermining social cohesion, fueling individualism, spreading misinformation, and being exploited by extremist groups. The article concludes that these movements are double-edged: they expand participation but may disrupt democracy if not integrated into inclusive policies.

Keywords: *Networked social movements, Organizational alternative, Media alternative, Youth engagement, Democracy*

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Introduction

Modern societies are undergoing rapid transformations in patterns of political and social expression, driven by the advancement of digital technologies and the emergence of interactive platforms that have created new spaces for communication and mobilization. Networked social movements have emerged as influential actors within the social landscape, reshaping relationships between individuals and institutions, and opening up new avenues for marginalized and oppositional groups to voice their demands outside the confines of official frameworks. In the Tunisian context, these movements reflect a dynamic social force that embodies a growing rejection of traditional media hegemony, while also expressing a desire to redistribute power within the public sphere.

Despite the promises these movements hold for broader democratic transformation, they also raise complex questions about the cohesion and stability of the social order. While they empower individuals to bypass surveillance and challenge official narratives, they simultaneously create channels for the spread of unreliable information, potentially exacerbating polarization and social fragmentation. From this perspective, analyzing the motivations that drive individuals to engage in these movements becomes essential to grasp the phenomenon in its sociological dimensions, with a focus on the delicate balance between the potential for positive change and the risks that may threaten the structure and stability of society.

Problem Statement

What motivations draw individuals increasingly toward networked social movements as a means of expressing political and social demands?

To what extent have these movements succeeded in breaking the dominance of official media and state apparatuses?

What risks do these movements pose to the social order?

Literature Review

Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

On the Concept of Networked Social Movements

Alain Touraine defined the social movement in general as a "collective behavior undertaken by a class actor to resist another class competitor, with the aim of directing society toward a specific historical trajectory within a given group" (Touraine, 1973, p. 36). A social movement, according to this framework, is built upon three foundational principles: the principle of identity, which concerns the values and norms that drive the participants of the movement; the principle of opposition, which reflects a rejection of the existing social

reality; and the principle of totality, which refers to the comprehensive nature of the demands advanced by the movement.

Networked social movements, on the other hand, are a new form of collective action that emerged in the age of digital technology. These movements rely heavily on the internet and social media platforms as their primary tools for organization, communication, and mobilization. They are characterized by the absence of centralized leadership, a capacity for rapid diffusion, and an openness to a wide array of causes including social justice, democracy, human rights, and environmental issues. Networked movements aim to enact social or political change by harnessing technology to enhance popular participation and to create spaces for dialogue and influence.

The concept of networked social movements was first theorized by Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells in his seminal work *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Castells, 2017), where he conducted an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of these movements and their role in shaping the future of collective action in the digital age.

Methods

This research adopts a qualitative approach that combines two techniques: direct observation and semi-structured interviews. The objective was to understand the motivations behind individuals'—particularly youth's—engagement in these movements, and to assess their impact on political action, social mobilization, and challenges posed to official media narratives. Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 48 young men and women, selected to ensure regional, spatial, and gender balance. Special focus was placed on 30 participants known for their actual or symbolic involvement in networked movements, representing the core group most actively engaged in post-2011 protest dynamics. These interviews were conducted between December 2 and December 10, 2024.

The sample was regionally distributed across six governorates, each representing a distinct geographical area of Tunisia: Sidi Bouzid (West-Central), Gafsa (Southwest), Sousse (East-Central), Tunis (Northeast/Capital), Jendouba (Northwest), and Medenine (Southeast). We allocated 8 participants from each governorate. Gender parity was strictly maintained (24 males and 24 females), and the sample included 20 participants from rural settings and 28 from urban areas. This distribution allowed for the deconstruction of spatial and political contextual differences.

Interviews were conducted in full compliance with ethical standards related to data protection and confidentiality. Participants were informed of the research objectives and granted the right to withdraw at any stage. Cultural and local specificities were respected throughout the process, and efforts were made to avoid any form of pressure or prior framing during the interviews.

For the analysis of the data collected, we drew on a range of theoretical frameworks offering multiple interpretative lenses for the phenomenon under study, most notably:

- *Manuel Castells' theory of the network society, to understand the digital infrastructure underlying youth agency.*
- *Postmodern sociology, to analyze the fluidity of values and identities that characterize contemporary youth mobilization.*
- *Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere, to deconstruct the dynamics of communication and the formation of public opinion in digital spaces.*
- *The sociology of social movements, to grasp forms of organization and mobilization beyond classical structures.*
- *Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, to analyze symbolic struggles within the political and cultural space.*

Through this methodological framework, we sought to combine analytical rigor with theoretical openness, in order to develop a multi-layered approach to a complex social phenomenon located at the intersection of rapidly evolving spatial, political, cultural, and technological transformations.

Motivations Behind Individual Attraction to Networked Social Movements:

The Digital as a Tool of Resistance and Response to Political and Social Blockade

In Tunisia, the digital sphere has played a pivotal role in circumventing the political and social deadlock imposed by an authoritarian regime. By generating a parallel public space, it has reshaped the public arena and contributed to dismantling traditional mechanisms of control and surveillance. This emergent digital space offered individuals a free zone through which they could bypass censorship and construct a collective discourse critical of state power and its apparatuses.

In the Tunisian case, networked social movements proved decisive in mobilizing youth and organizing the protests that culminated in the fall of the Ben Ali regime in 2011. Digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter widened the scope of popular participation and allowed marginalized groups to express themselves and mobilize without centralized leadership or traditional organizational structures. As one young participant (S.Q.) put it: "Ben Ali closed all the doors before us, even the walls had ears. Without Facebook, we would never have uncovered the truth, organized ourselves, or coordinated our efforts" (Interview with S.Q., Sidi Bouzid, 02/12/2024).

From this perspective, networked social movements can be seen as the extension of structural transformations in the modalities of collective action. Digital technology

empowered individuals to overcome the physical and institutional barriers that had previously hindered political participation. In Tunisia, the digital sphere became an effective tool of mobilization, allowing youth and marginalized groups to engage in expressive and organizational practices outside formal frameworks. This led to the emergence of a decentralized protest movement resistant to co-optation or repression. A close analysis of the networked structure of these movements reveals their capacity to integrate the online and offline domains, whereby digital interaction became a direct extension of street activism.

Through the rapid circulation and recycling of symbols and slogans across digital platforms, these movements succeeded in constructing an oppositional public opinion that broke the barrier of fear and contributed to a redistribution of power within society. The digital space also enabled the real-time documentation of human rights abuses, reinforcing a collective sense of injustice and further legitimizing the protest movement.

In this context, the digital sphere transcended its role as a mere communication tool and emerged as an apparatus for restructuring social and political relations. Youth appeared as central agents of change, surpassing traditional elites and institutional hierarchies. The fall of Ben Ali was thus the inevitable outcome of a deeply rooted social movement anchored in a digital environment that provided new opportunities for resisting authoritarianism and reconfiguring the political and social field.

This transformation can be interpreted through Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, wherein the digital space constitutes an emerging field that generates a new form of symbolic capital rooted in horizontal and digital political engagement. This field enabled marginalized actors to reshape collective representations of identity around shared concerns that transcend class divisions, geographic boundaries, and centralized leadership. Consequently, traditional forms of political participation and collective mobilization were surpassed. Young people, being the most technologically literate demographic, became dominant actors within the political and social field, redefining the boundaries of power and leadership.

Social media played a central role in reshaping the symbolic and social capital of youth, allowing them to position themselves as influential forces outside the official institutional framework. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter no longer functioned merely as tools of communication but were transformed into arenas of symbolic struggle to assert new visions and contest established power relations. Through these tools, youth acquired cultural and technical capital that allowed them to challenge the symbolic domination of traditional actors, restructure relationships among political and social players, and shift the rules of engagement within the field.

Moreover, these movements helped to expose the falsity of official narratives surrounding "stability and development" by documenting the grievances of marginalized groups and revealing the social inequalities that the ruling regime sought to conceal. Thus, the digital sphere became a theater of symbolic conflict between state and society, where individuals succeeded in converting it into a tool of resistance against systemic blockages.

Emphasizing the role of social media in organizing, educating, and mobilizing youth-led grassroots actions against the Ben Ali regime, Manuel Castells identifies three primary factors behind the success of the Tunisian revolution, one of which is social media:

- 1. The presence of a dynamic group of unemployed university graduates who led the revolution without relying on traditional leadership.*
- 2. The existence of a strong culture of digital activism that had openly criticized the regime for over a decade.*
- 3. A relatively high rate of internet penetration, including access from homes, schools, and internet cafés. (Castells, 2017, p. 57)*

It can thus be argued that social media was not merely a platform for expressing dissent; it constituted a foundational pillar for constructing collective consciousness and articulating a unified protest discourse. These tools played an essential role in mobilizing individuals and structuring a cohesive popular movement. Social media fostered an interactive environment that enabled youth to overcome the traditional barriers erected by the regime and helped transform their demands into a mass movement capable of imposing a new reality.

Accordingly, social media platforms played a critical role in dismantling the authoritarian system and paving the way for a new phase of political and social transformation in Tunisia. This analysis confirms that the digital sphere was not simply an intermediary; rather, it constituted a new social structure that reshaped identities, relationships, and modes of resistance, thereby contributing fundamentally to the transformative change that unfolded in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

Networked Social Movements as a Response to the Crisis of Institutional Trust

Following the Tunisian revolution, traditional institutions such as political parties and parliament experienced a deep crisis of trust due to their failure to fulfill the promises of the revolution—particularly in relation to social justice and economic development. This failure drove youth and marginalized groups to seek alternative spaces to express their demands in a direct and unmediated manner. In this context, networked social movements emerged as a natural response to the crisis, providing more flexible and non-conventional channels for organization and collective action.

A clear example of this is the "Manich Msameh" ("I Will Not Forgive") campaign, which skillfully utilized digital media to mobilize popular support and coordinate opposition to the proposed Economic Reconciliation Law. This movement—characterized by a youthful, revolutionary, and supra-partisan spirit—rejected amnesty for corrupt individuals and called for the withdrawal of the reconciliation project.

As noted by a collective study, it is “a social movement infused with a youthful revolutionary spirit, supra-partisan, marked by a refusal to pardon the corrupt and a demand

to withdraw the economic and administrative reconciliation project” (Collective authorship, 2023, p. 27). Thanks to its young leadership and its ability to harness social media for mobilization and awareness-raising, the movement became a major pressure force on political power and attracted considerable attention from both local and international media.

This sentiment is clearly articulated by a young man, H.T., who stated:

"After the revolution, politicians only pursued their personal interests. They looted and got caught up in side conflicts. They didn't care about the youth or the poor. Tell me, what have we achieved for young people? What did we gain from the revolution? As youth, we will not remain spectators in the face of these looters—they stole our revolution. We will expose their lies and continue our mobilization in the streets, on Facebook, and from everywhere to reclaim our revolution." (Interview with H.T., Gafsa, 02/12/2024)

This testimony reflects a profound crisis of trust between youth and the post-revolution political institutions. Young people perceive that the political elites have deviated from the revolution's original objectives, prioritizing their own interests at the expense of the concerns of youth and marginalized groups. What emerges in this narrative is a deep sense of exclusion and marginalization, which reveals the weakness of post-revolutionary mechanisms of political and social inclusion. No coherent policies have been formulated to address the aspirations of young people, who were at the very core of the revolutionary movement.

The testimonies reveal a growing level of political awareness among youth and their refusal to remain passive. They also highlight the continuity of protest through digital platforms and public demonstrations, illustrating how social media has become an alternative space for resistance and accountability. This ongoing mobilization reflects the revolution as an unfinished social process and indicates that newly established democratic institutions are now facing significant challenges in rebuilding their relationship with the youth.

Restoring trust and fostering genuine participation in political and social decision-making will require deep structural changes and a redefinition of the role of young citizens in the democratic sphere. This dynamic is not unique to the Tunisian context; similar patterns of youth-led, digitally mediated mobilization have emerged in various international settings, reflecting a broader crisis in the legitimacy of traditional institutions and a shared search for alternative forms of political engagement.

Comparable international experiences reveal that networked social movements are not a phenomenon confined to the Tunisian context; rather, they represent a global pattern of contemporary protest emerging in contexts marked by the erosion of legitimacy of traditional institutions. In Spain, the "Indignados" movement emerged in 2011 as a reaction to unemployment, corruption, and the declining representativeness of political parties, relying primarily on digital media to organize protests and exchange information.

In the United States, the "Occupy Wall Street" movement played a similar role in exposing economic inequalities, utilizing social media as a vital tool for mobilization and the

creation of decentralized support networks. In Hong Kong, the "Umbrella Movement" illustrated how youth-led movements can integrate both street-level action and digital strategies to resist what they perceive as authoritarian encroachments on freedoms. These examples highlight the capacity of networked movements to bypass traditional party and union mediation, and underscore how digital platforms become alternative arenas for expression, negotiation, and symbolic as well as political contestation in an era of declining institutional trust.

The experience of networked social movements in Tunisia and beyond indicates a profound shift in patterns of protest and political participation, where digital spaces have become alternative arenas for organization and accountability amid declining youth trust in traditional institutions. This shift reflects a collective search for new forms of political engagement that break away from classical party mediation and affirm the revolution's continuation as an unfinished social process.

Flexible Collective Identity and Social Liquidity

We begin our analysis here with a statement by the young man (A.K.):

"I don't like commitments, and I can't stick to schedules or programs related to demonstrations or political affairs. These aren't my concerns. It's just me and my mindset—if I come across a cause that draws me in and speaks to me, I participate with the group in the simplest way possible: by sharing events on Facebook, commenting, reposting content, and why not even take to the streets, if the issue really matters to me." (Interview with A.K., Sousse, 10/12/2024)

This statement by A.K. reflects profound transformations in the structure of social and political participation in contemporary times. It can be analyzed through the lens of social liquidity and flexible collective identity, both of which have become defining features of networked social movements. His rejection of fixed commitments and traditional protest schedules reveals a deeper phenomenon: the decline of conventional forms of structured collective action, and the rise of more autonomous, fluid forms of social engagement. This shift aligns with what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes as "liquid modernity," in which modern life is increasingly characterized by instability and constant change, pushing individuals to prioritize personal choices that match their ever-shifting rhythms of life.

In this context, the young man's position cannot be dismissed as a mere individual preference—it is, rather, an expression of a broader pattern of situational engagement in socio-political causes. This mode of engagement is anchored in what can be called flexible collective identity, which is not constructed upon a stable ideological belonging or a long-term commitment, but rather organized around specific issues that resonate with personal concerns and immediate contexts. A.K.'s assertion that he joins causes that "draw him in and concern him" illustrates a shift from collective identity as a fixed allegiance to one that is

episodic, fluid, and issue-based. This form of flexibility grants individuals greater freedom of action, but also raises questions about sustainability and the organizational coherence of social movements.

Digital space plays a pivotal role in shaping these new dynamics. Social media platforms have become central arenas for expressing opinions and participating in activism. A.K.'s reference to using Facebook as a minimal form of engagement—commenting, sharing, and reposting—highlights a fundamental transformation in how collective action is organized. As Manuel Castells (2012) notes, digital networks reshape collective action by creating virtual public spheres that bring together individuals based on shared interests, without the need for rigid organizational hierarchies. These networked dynamics support a decentralized, flexible model of activism where individuals participate at varying levels of commitment—from passive online interaction to direct physical mobilization when necessary.

Furthermore, A.K.'s statement reflects a redefinition of collective commitment in the age of networked social movements. Commitment is no longer tied to continuous engagement in a single cause or membership in a specific group. Rather, it has become contextual and fluid, shaped by personal priorities and evolving social contexts. This shift mirrors the overlapping nature of identities and interests, where individuals may engage in multiple causes simultaneously, depending on the intersections of their lived experiences and worldviews. This new pattern of engagement aligns with the nature of the digital era, where people can seamlessly navigate between diverse issues and identities, becoming more autonomous and less bound to traditional frames of activism.

In light of these transformations, A.K.'s statement underscores how networked social movements are reshaping the very concept of collective action to better fit the demands of contemporary life. Social liquidity and flexible collective identity lie at the heart of these movements, offering individuals greater agency in selecting causes and modes of participation. However, this also presents challenges related to continuity, coherence, and long-term organizing. This analysis thus invites a deeper understanding of how social and political action is being reconfigured under the technological and cultural transformations of our time.

Social Networks as an Organizational Tool: The Digital Bypass of Geographical Constraints

In the context of accelerated digital transformations, social media in general—and networked social movements in particular—have become prominent tools reshaping social and political relations, especially in societies suffering from geographical and social marginalization. These platforms have provided a virtual space through which traditional barriers can be bypassed, granting wide segments of the population opportunities for expression and organization, far from the domination of the center. In this regard, the

experience of individuals in remote areas illustrates how technology breaks isolation and brings attention to issues often neglected by traditional media.

As a young woman (M.A.) puts it:

"We are at the very bottom of the country—who even hears about us? It's as if we belong to another state, another world. We lack everything: jobs, hospitals, universities, and a decent life like other people. If it weren't for Facebook, through which we can raise our voices and demands, no one would have heard us or even known we existed. We are forgotten and excluded. Even if we protested, would anyone hear us? Would the media come here?"(Interview with M.A., Tunisia, 03/12/2024)

This quote reflects the deep sense of isolation and marginalization experienced by individuals in peripheral regions, while simultaneously highlighting the central role of social media as an organizational tool that enables the marginalized to voice their struggles. As the young woman notes, Facebook represents a vital window that allows individuals to transcend both geographical and social boundaries. Through this digital space, they create a virtual presence that strengthens their visibility in the public sphere—underscoring the growing role of technology in redefining the relationship between center and periphery.

M.A.'s account also reflects the transformation that digital technology has brought to the concept of social and political space. While remote regions once faced immense difficulty in accessing traditional media, social networks have introduced new possibilities for overcoming this barrier. Contact with the center is no longer conditioned by the existence of formal channels or traditional intermediaries. Instead, individuals can now organize themselves and create autonomous social movements that reshape their relationship with both authority and the broader society. This transformation redefines the notion of "presence," which is now achieved through digital interaction that enables individuals to transcend isolation and assert their demands as an undeniable force.

In his analysis of the network society, Manuel Castells highlights the fundamental transformation of time and space brought about by communication technologies. He introduces two core concepts: the "space of flows" and "timeless time." While time and space have traditionally been interlinked in both nature and society, new communication technologies have decoupled this relationship, allowing social activities to be performed across different places and times, without the constraints of simultaneity (Castells, 2014, pp. 66–67).

The space of flows refers to the technological and organizational possibility of conducting activities in electronically connected environments, where information is exchanged and social practices are executed without the necessity of physical presence or temporal synchronization. In other words, interactions among individuals or institutions can occur in different locations and times—as happens in financial markets or media networks. However, the space of flows is not an abstract vacuum; it is composed of “nodes” or specific points connected through communication networks. These nodes derive their meaning and

function from their role within the network, not from the physical nature of the place itself (Castells, 2014).

By contrast, traditional places embedded in everyday practices derive their meaning from the activities that occur within them. Their identity is rooted in locality, function, and social embeddedness. In the space of flows, however, meaning arises from participation in a network—be it economic, political, or media-related.

The concept of timeless time expresses the disconnection of social activities from traditional chronological rhythms. Activities can occur asynchronously, allowing a remarkable flexibility in managing both time and space. Within this framework, social practices are anchored in networks that rely on the flow of information across dispersed locations. Thus, the spatial configuration of the network society is characterized by three interconnected elements: the places where activities occur, the people who carry them out, and the communication networks that connect and coordinate these activities (Castells, 2014, p. 67).

Accordingly, the network society redefines the relationship between time and space, where place becomes part of an informational flow, and activities gain a new dimension linking function and meaning through technology.

From an organizational perspective, M.A.'s statement shows how digital technology provides a decentralized infrastructure that enhances individuals' capacity for self-organization and communication. Facebook and similar platforms enable the formation of solidarity networks that transcend geographical borders, turning local grievances into national—or even global—issues. The digital realm thus becomes a tool of struggle and resistance, allowing the marginalized to challenge exclusion by establishing a direct dialogue with the public and policymakers.

Yet despite this empowering function, the quote also reveals a deeper frustration regarding the lack of tangible institutional response. While Facebook allows for the expression of voice, its impact on producing real change on the ground remains limited. This contradiction underscores a key challenge: how to translate digital momentum into field-level mobilization capable of influencing decision-making processes.

In conclusion, social media today serve as essential tools for the marginalized in confronting geographical and social constraints. Although these platforms may not always guarantee immediate change, they remain powerful means of breaking silence and drawing attention to forgotten issues—making them integral to the dynamics of social and political action in the digital age.

Have These Movements Succeeded in Challenging the Dominance of Official Media and State Apparatuses?

Through observation and qualitative interviews, we identify two particularly influential moments that reveal the effectiveness of networked social movements in Tunisia following the 2011 revolution: their pivotal role in toppling the Ben Ali regime by deconstructing its dominant narratives and state-controlled discourse, and their significant contribution to the unexpected rise of presidential candidate Kaïs Saïed, despite his marginal presence in mainstream media and his exclusion from opinion polls.

Undermining Dominant Narratives and Redistributing Media Power

Networked social movements in Tunisia have played a central role in challenging and dismantling the hegemonic narratives disseminated by official media under Ben Ali's authoritarian rule. These movements, empowered by modern communication technologies and social media platforms, succeeded in circumventing the state's tight control over the flow of information and in offering alternative accounts that contrasted sharply with the government's official discourse. Through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, they managed to broadcast real-time information and document state violations and abuses that the regime sought to conceal. This turned social media into a crucial source of alternative news and narratives that significantly contributed to mobilizing public sentiment and fueling revolutionary action.

Moreover, these movements helped to redistribute media power away from traditional institutions that were firmly under the control of the state and political elites. This emerging media dynamic allowed individuals to appropriate media tools for their own purposes, creating autonomous spaces to reveal truths obscured by political manipulation. As a result, the Tunisian public sphere became more pluralistic and dynamic, enabling citizens—especially youth—to actively shape dominant narratives and engage with events in real time. This immediacy and interactivity accelerated the pace of political change.

Official media had long functioned as an instrument of symbolic domination, monopolizing the production and circulation of information and regulating the interpretation of reality. By leveraging platforms like Twitter and Facebook, networked movements became powerful counter-forces to this monopoly, exposing the inconsistencies of official discourse and offering credible, user-generated alternatives. In doing so, they undermined the ability of traditional elites to shape collective consciousness and contributed to the emergence of a critical and reflexive public.

These movements also dismantled the structural barriers that once prevented ordinary individuals from participating in the media field. They enabled users to move beyond the passive role of receivers and become active producers and distributors of content. Thanks to accessible platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, individuals could now publish news, analyze events, and highlight issues often ignored by mainstream media. This participatory model generated a new informational landscape where access to knowledge was

democratized, no longer confined to professional elites, thereby enhancing freedom of expression and enriching public debate.

What renders these networked movements particularly effective is that they do not rely on large amounts of economic or cultural capital. While traditional media fields privilege those with financial means and institutional credentials, the digital media space increasingly values symbolic capital—such as communicative competence, authenticity, influence, and engagement. This shift has contributed to the erosion of the hierarchical structure of conventional media and the emergence of a decentralized model where media power is distributed more horizontally across users and networks.

The 2019 Presidential Elections: Networked Social Movements as Agents of Change

As one young man (A.B.) expressed:

"The political class in Tunisia is backed by very powerful lobbies. They have money, control the media, and are supported by businesspeople and even foreign actors. They don't want an honest and decent person, so we, as young people, relied on ourselves and supported Kaïs Saïed because he is clean and different from them. That's why they're trying to block him by any means. Facebook helped us spread the word about his integrity. We believed in him and in his honesty. He is close to the people, one of us, and uninterested in power, unlike politicians who are obsessed with power, money, and prestige." (Interview with A.B., Sousse, December 10, 2024)

This testimony illustrates the growing role of networked social movements in reshaping the Tunisian political landscape, particularly during the 2019 presidential elections. It reflects a profound sense of disillusionment among young people toward traditional political elites, who are perceived as complicit with economic, media, and foreign lobbies. This alienation has driven segments of the youth to seek out political figures who embody moral integrity and transparency—qualities they recognized in Kaïs Saïed.

This account reveals the digital space as a vital arena for political mobilization, where social media platforms—especially Facebook—played a central role in supporting non-establishment candidates. Notably, this support did not emerge from partisan structures or institutional directives but arose spontaneously from individuals who saw in Saïed a moral alternative to what they viewed as a corrupt political class.

The statement demonstrates how networked social movements have enabled a departure from conventional modes of political engagement. The digital sphere offers new possibilities for expression and organization, without requiring substantial financial resources or access to official media. Young people were thus able to exert influence on public opinion via social platforms, underscoring the transformative potential of these movements in Tunisia's political equation.

The mention of Facebook as a central tool for supporting Kaïs Saïed reflects the expanding role of virtual space in generating new political symbols. This space has come to

be viewed as a source of popular legitimacy that bypasses traditional media institutions and entrenched economic elites. Such dynamics align with the concept of "digital democracy," wherein individuals can voice their demands and participate in public life directly, thereby limiting the capacity of traditional elites to monopolize the political field.

This phenomenon also reveals a socio-economic dimension: the popular backing of Saïed reflects a collective yearning to restore ethical values to political practice. The notion of "integrity," repeatedly emphasized by the young interviewee, has become a central criterion for evaluating political candidates. This shift signifies a movement away from programmatic discourse toward a value-based rhetoric centered on identity and personal ethics—an evolution that redefines the nature of the relationship between citizens and their representatives.

Additionally, the testimony expresses an underlying generational tension within the political field. Young Tunisians—the country's largest demographic—feel excluded from decision-making processes. This marginalization has prompted them to seek figures who articulate their aspirations for social, economic, and political justice. In this context, networked movements have emerged as platforms for youth to reassert their agency in public life, circumventing traditional party structures often viewed as extensions of the pre-revolutionary system.

Ultimately, this statement captures a pivotal political moment in Tunisia's post-revolutionary trajectory. It signals the crystallization of a new political consciousness—one that seeks to redefine the rules of democratic engagement through digital tools and affirms the status of networked social movements as genuine agents of transformation.

The Risks of Networked Social Movements to the Social Order

Disrupting Democratic Institutional Functioning

Networked social movements represent a broad space that allows individuals to express their aspirations and engage in new forms of social mobilization, thereby enhancing the potential to transcend traditional frameworks and deepen civic participation. However, despite the promising prospects they offer, these movements carry inherent challenges that may threaten the rational foundations of democratic governance. The absence of rigid structures and centralized leadership often results in fragmentation and divergent visions, hindering the formulation of coherent strategies to achieve collective goals. Moreover, the rapid dissemination of demands through digital platforms contributes to a climate of polarization and tension, where emotional and reactive expressions frequently override rational and structured debate.

In addition, the open nature of these movements renders them vulnerable to exploitation by actors seeking to steer their trajectories in service of short-term or factional interests, undermining both political and social stability.

Stray et al. (2023) argue that the opaque and unaccountable nature of algorithmic governance on social platforms can manipulate public discourse and fragment civic deliberation. Without democratic oversight and transparency, these systems risk displacing institutional logic with attention-maximizing logic, destabilizing democratic norms and procedures.

As such, while networked movements have the potential to stimulate public awareness, they risk becoming sources of disorder if not integrated within comprehensive approaches that ensure their inclusion in balanced democratic trajectories.

In the Tunisian context, the example of the El-Kamour sit-in stands as a compelling illustration. The protesters at El-Kamour skillfully utilized social media to organize and coordinate their actions, enabling them to transcend geographical boundaries and maintain direct communication with relatives and supporters both within and outside the country. Through mobile phones, they continuously shared news and exchanged information, which reinforced internal solidarity and broadened awareness of their cause. This intensive use of technology also facilitated democratic and participatory forms of group deliberation, whereby decisions were made through wide-ranging consultations among participants, adding a new dimension to their movement.

However, the organizational and communicative model adopted by the El-Kamour protesters poses certain challenges and potential threats to Tunisia's democratic fabric and the public interest. It encouraged defiance of state institutions and eroded their authority. Numerous images and videos circulated on social media showed the halting of oil pumping operations and depicted Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi seemingly subdued during negotiations with leaders of the Kamour Youth Movement. One of the movement's prominent figures appeared wearing a cap in a setting that seemed to disregard the stature of the state and its institutions, sparking widespread debate on social media.

Olivier Costa argues that networked social movements pose significant threats to democracy by undermining traditional political systems and fueling emotional discourse, which in turn reinforces populism and weakens rational dialogue. These movements, easily organized through social media platforms, can mobilize on a large scale without traditional resources, thereby threatening national representation and intermediary institutions. Moreover, these networks distort democratic logic by intensifying polarization and promoting populist narratives—evidenced by the rise of populist leaders such as Trump and Bolsonaro, and phenomena like Brexit and the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (Costa, 2020, p.1).

Yet, it is essential to distinguish between populist mobilizations that threaten democratic procedures and radical democratic expressions that aim to revitalize political participation. As Chantal Mouffe emphasizes:

"It is not in our power to eliminate conflicts and escape our human condition, but it is in our power to create the practices, discourses and institutions that would allow those conflicts to take an agonistic form." (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20)

This quote encapsulates Mouffe's vision of radical democracy—not as a system that eliminates conflict, but one that transforms antagonism into agonism within a shared democratic horizon. From this perspective, not all networked mobilizations equate to destabilizing populism. While some may exploit digital platforms to bypass institutions, others can serve as legitimate vehicles of dissent and pluralistic engagement, especially when anchored in inclusive, deliberative frameworks. Clarifying this distinction is crucial to avoid conflating democratic contestation with anti-democratic disruption.

This indicates that networked social movements are a consequence of deep transformations in the global socio-political landscape. They rely on social media platforms as key tools for mobilization and recruitment, allowing individuals to bypass traditional structures of organization. While such movements reflect popular desires for expression and participation, they also pose serious threats to democracy, manifesting in several ways.

First, they undermine the traditional political system by weakening political parties and intermediary institutions, which historically constituted the backbone of representative democracy. A case in point is the Yellow Vests movement in France, which successfully organized large-scale protests without relying on conventional resources or structures. This revealed that such movements can act as *de facto* alternatives to political parties, thereby contributing to the erosion of traditional democratic institutions and the decline of structured political dialogue.

Second, networked movements fuel emotional discourse. Social media platforms favor expressive and emotional communication over rational dialogue, which leads to the absence of thoughtful discussions and their replacement with angry or polarized reactions. This dynamic heightens social polarization and weakens societal capacity for mutual understanding.

Third, these movements amplify populism, which simplifies complex political and social issues and offers superficial solutions. Such discourse is often used to exploit social and economic anxieties, deepening divisions within society and eroding public trust in democratic institutions.

Lastly, networked movements distort traditional democratic logic by promoting ideas through incitement and emotional appeal. This fosters the creation of "echo chambers" where ideas are reproduced without critical scrutiny, thereby weakening intellectual pluralism—one of democracy's foundational pillars.

Despite these threats, networked social movements remain important arenas for expression and civic engagement. The central challenge, then, lies in striking a balance between the freedoms these movements enable and the imperative to safeguard robust democratic institutions capable of navigating contemporary challenges.

Striking this balance proves challenging, as numerous international cases illustrate how networked social movements have at times shifted from fostering democratic expression to threatening democratic stability:

In the United States, social media played a pivotal role in mobilizing supporters of former President Donald Trump, culminating in the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021—an event that shook one of the world’s oldest democratic systems and revealed how populist mobilization through digital platforms can undermine institutional legitimacy and escalate into violence. Similarly, in Brazil, former President Jair Bolsonaro relied on closed messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram to disseminate conspiracy theories and cast doubt on electoral outcomes, thereby fueling political polarization and ultimately leading to attempts to storm state institutions in January 2023.

In the United Kingdom, digital campaigns promoting Brexit reduced complex political issues to populist slogans, resulting in a referendum driven by misinformation and culminating in deep societal divisions. These cases underscore that when networked movements lack democratic and institutional framing, they not only enable free expression but also become tools for mass agitation, societal fragmentation, and the erosion of representative legitimacy.

In general, networked social movements may enhance civic participation, but in some cases, they weaken democratic institutions and increase polarization, which calls for developing mechanisms that balance freedom of expression with political stability.

Dismantling Traditional Values: Individualism vs. Social Solidarity

Networked social movements, due to their structural flexibility, tend to foster the rise of individualism by enabling individuals to freely express their views without relying on traditional frameworks such as political parties, unions, or collective organizations. Through these platforms, allegiance to conventional groups is increasingly replaced by intangible, virtual affiliations. While this individualism empowers personal autonomy, it simultaneously contributes to the erosion of social solidarity—an essential foundation for societal cohesion and the realization of "organic solidarity." In its place emerges a growing social fragmentation caused by the absence of shared values that once unified individuals within communities.

One of the most immediate consequences of this phenomenon is the weakening of social bonds. Traditional societies have historically depended on values such as belonging, solidarity, and the primacy of collective interests. In contrast, networked movements promote individualistic values, resulting in a diminished sense of connection to collective needs. Traditional structures lose their centrality in favor of virtual networks, which lack material and emotional depth. This shift has led to increased social isolation and the emergence of new

forms of relationships based on temporary, interest-driven interactions—ultimately threatening the long-term sustainability of social cohesion.

Individualism has been further reinforced by the growing social and psychological precarity that characterizes the postmodern condition. As the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman poignantly observes:

"In a world where the future is, at best, murky and obscure, and most likely fraught with danger and risk, it seems unreasonable to set long-term goals, relinquish personal gain for the benefit of the group, or sacrifice the present for a promised future. Any opportunity not seized in the here and now is considered a wasted one, and thus an unforgivable sin. In today's world, commitments often obstruct tomorrow's possibilities."

Therefore, the lighter and more superficial they are, the less harm they can cause. 'Now' becomes the slogan of life's strategy... Human bonds are not like mechanical spare parts; they are not ready-made. They rot and spoil quickly if sealed too tightly and are not easily replaced once they lose their usefulness."(Bauman, 2012, pp. 233–234)

In other words, the fragility of human relationships in modern societies reflects an escalating tendency toward individualism. People increasingly prioritize quick personal gains over the cultivation of deep and enduring ties. In a world shaped by uncertainty and risk, interpersonal commitments are often seen as burdens that could hinder advancement or the exploitation of present opportunities. Relationships, under these conditions, are not stable entities but rather transient connections, quickly losing their value if they no longer serve immediate interests. This precarious nature of social bonds deepens the sense of isolation and weakens the social fabric. Individuals become more cautious in their interactions, favoring easily dissolvable relationships over those that require emotional investment and responsibility.

Rumor and Distortion: The Loss of Truth as a Social Construct

On social media platforms in Tunisia, users are increasingly less concerned with the sources and accuracy of the overwhelming flow of news that floods their mobile devices. Upon encountering a piece of news, many individuals immediately respond with emotional and impressionistic comments, often marked by carelessness and indifference. This behavior is facilitated by Facebook's ability to disseminate information at unprecedented speed, yet without providing robust mechanisms for verifying the truthfulness of such content. This rapid circulation of news leaves society vulnerable to rumors and false information, leaves society vulnerable to rumors and false information.

Tucker et al. (2023) show that even small adjustments in Facebook's news feed algorithm—such as altering content ranking or reducing reshares—can significantly limit the spread of polarizing or misleading information, though they have limited direct effect on users' political beliefs. This reveals the algorithm's role in shaping the media environment

even without overt ideological bias, which can significantly shape public opinion and influence individuals and institutions alike.

Rumors do not merely generate temporary confusion; they gradually erode trust—both between individuals and between citizens and institutions. Truth itself becomes a matter of suspicion, which in turn reshapes the public's relationship with traditional sources of knowledge such as official media and academic institutions. Within this environment, truth ceases to be a stable or shared reality and instead becomes a relative and contested notion. This epistemological uncertainty opens the door for populist discourses and contributes to a broader state of anomie, as described by Émile Durkheim—a condition marked by the disintegration of normative frameworks and a weakening of collective moral guidance.

Polarization and Distortion: Reinforcing Social Divides

Networked social movements provide fertile ground for the proliferation of extremist discourses, enabling the rapid dissemination of radical ideas to wide segments of society. Within this dynamic, the space for moderate discourses—those that typically offer common ground among divergent groups—diminishes significantly. According to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "Spiral of Silence" theory, these platforms contribute to the silencing of moderate voices and the deepening of societal divisions.(Neumann, 1974)

The polarization fueled by these networked dynamics results in sharp cleavages between different social groups. Social media platforms are increasingly instrumentalized as tools to discredit and defame opposing voices, thereby escalating social tensions and weakening interpersonal communication. Twitter's ranking algorithms, as noted by Huszár et al. (2021), tend to amplify emotionally charged and ideologically extreme content. This not only increases user engagement but also entrenches echo chambers and exacerbates polarization, weakening the potential for cross-cutting dialogue and mutual understanding.

As these dynamics persist, achieving societal consensus becomes increasingly difficult in the absence of rational dialogue, which is essential for social cohesion.

A clear example of this is the significant role played by networked social movements in the spread of radical Salafi thought in Tunisia following the 2011 revolution. Salafi groups capitalized on the security and political vacuum left by the fall of the previous regime to construct vast mobilization networks through platforms like Facebook and YouTube. These platforms facilitated the dissemination of a simplified religious discourse centered on doctrinal purity and Islamic law, employing religious symbolism to address intensifying social and political crises marked by sharp political and economic fragmentation.

This post-revolutionary period offered a conducive environment for the spread of Salafi ideology, which positioned itself as a moral alternative to politically embattled elites who, in the eyes of a significant portion of society, lacked popular legitimacy. Salafi groups further exploited widespread feelings of marginalization and youth unemployment by offering a

discourse that justified social frustration and imbued rebellion against the state with religious legitimacy. Consequently, large numbers of Tunisian youth were drawn to this ideology. Social media facilitated the formation of tightly knit virtual communities that reinforced hardline Salafi thought and fostered a shared sense of belonging to groups advocating a return to Islamic "authenticity." (Karoui, 2019)

This momentum contributed to the growth of extremist ideologies and the emergence of organizations such as Ansar al-Sharia, which skillfully used digital platforms to recruit followers and propagate its ideas. The Tunisian state consequently faced major challenges in controlling online extremist discourse, prompting the development of regulatory policies and awareness campaigns aimed at promoting a moderate and centrist religious discourse. Despite these efforts, the digital space remains an open arena for Salafi movements that continue to exploit social and economic grievances. This reality underscores the need to reinforce pluralistic values and enhance the resilience of youth against extremist narratives.

More broadly, if Jürgen Habermas diagnosed the negative evolution of the public sphere in 18th-century Europe—from a domain of rational-critical debate among private individuals, free from state or private interference, to one dominated in modern times by private interests and commercial media, eroding rational debate in favor of mass manipulation (Habermas, 1989).

Then contemporary transformations suggest that social media represents a new phase in the evolution of the public sphere. These platforms have redefined public discourse by granting individuals extensive space to express their views and engage in societal debates. However, they have not been immune to the very challenges Habermas identified, such as information manipulation, the spread of fake news, and the dominance of commercial and political interests. Nonetheless, social media remains a powerful tool that can help revive the public sphere—if leveraged to promote rational dialogue and democratic participation.

Results

1. Networked Social Movements as an Effective Organizational and Media Alternative

The Tunisian experience demonstrates that networked social movements constitute an effective alternative to traditional organizational and media structures, especially during major transitional moments such as the 2011 revolution and the 2019 elections. These movements succeeded in breaking the state media's monopoly over information and in redistributing power, thereby enabling youth groups—often unaffiliated with political parties or civil society organizations—to influence public opinion using simple digital tools. These networks provided an open, decentralized space for mobilization, allowing marginalized actors to bypass institutional censorship and express themselves through their own means.

2. Networked Movements as a Potential Threat to Social and Democratic Order

Despite their emancipatory potential, networked movements pose tangible risks to the stability of both the social and democratic orders. The absence of formal organization and clear leadership disrupts institutional functioning and weakens coordination among actors. Moreover, such movements tend to promote individualism at the expense of solidarity, and facilitate the spread of disinformation—undermining shared understandings of truth and generating conditions of social anomie. Additionally, they have contributed to heightened political polarization and societal fragmentation, as evidenced by global experiences such as the Trump phenomenon or Brexit. In Tunisia, extremist groups—such as Salafists—have exploited the digital space as a platform for ideological agitation and recruitment.

3. Functional Ambiguity: Between Empowerment and Disorder

Networked movements embody a dual functional nature. On the one hand, they empower marginalized groups that have lost trust in institutions; on the other, they possess a high potential to destabilize the political system by employing populist discourses that bypass institutional democratic channels. These movements provide an open space for expression and protest, but also generate impulsive political actions that may erode the institutional foundations of public dialogue.

4. Shifting Collective Identity and Patterns of Political Engagement

Networked movements reflect a profound transformation in the structure of collective identity and modes of political commitment. Rigid collective identities rooted in party or ideological affiliation have waned, giving way to flexible, situational identities organized around immediate issues. Engagement within these movements is increasingly driven by emotional impulses rather than long-term commitment, rendering them susceptible to rapid disintegration or ideological co-optation, and limiting their capacity for continuity and cumulative institutional building.

5. Implicit Recommendations: Toward Flexible Framing without Repression

These transformations highlight the need for a new institutional approach to engage with networked movements. Rather than resorting to repression or containment through traditional methods, institutions should aim to frame these movements within flexible structures that respect their autonomy and grant them legitimacy. Moreover, promoting media and critical literacy has become essential to mitigate the effects of rumors and false information. At the same time, the digital space should be integrated into institutional conceptions of the public sphere to enable the institutionalization of digital activism without descending into chaos.

6. General Conclusion: Dual Effectiveness and the Reshaping of the Public Sphere

In Tunisia, networked social movements represent more than mere tools of protest; they serve as deep indicators of a reshaping public sphere and transformed political and social agency. However, they remain inherently dual in their effects: they can be instruments of liberation and empowerment, but also of infiltration and fragmentation. The challenge,

therefore, lies not in neutralizing or opposing them, but in understanding their logic and steering them toward a new, more inclusive and adaptive democratic horizon.

Conclusion

Networked social movements embody the complex interplay between digital technologies and the structural crises facing contemporary societies. In Tunisia, they have emerged as responses to political paralysis and institutional distrust, leveraging digital platforms to bypass traditional constraints and mobilize around evolving demands. These dynamics signal a transformation in collective consciousness and a reconfiguration of the public sphere along more fluid, decentralized lines.

Despite their disruptive potential, these movements face significant challenges. Their organizational fragility, susceptibility to fragmentation, and dominance of individualistic discourse threaten social cohesion. The spread of misinformation further erodes shared truths, undermining democratic institutions and fueling polarization.

Tunisia's case illustrates a dual dynamic: the promise of democratic renewal alongside the risk of disintegration. This tension demands a critical approach that situates networked movements within broader historical and structural frameworks. Ensuring their transformative capacity supports political stability requires inclusive institutional policies that integrate them into democratic processes.

Institutional innovation is essential. Mechanisms such as digital consultative platforms can bridge the gap between digital activism and formal politics. The state must also modernize its communicative tools—not for propaganda, but for genuine dialogue with emerging demands beyond classical organizational structures.

A renewed legal framework is equally urgent—one that protects freedom of digital expression without defaulting to censorship or securitization. Legal safeguards should preserve the independence of these horizontally organized movements and prevent cooptation by political or commercial actors.

Moreover, promoting critical digital literacy—through education and civil society initiatives—is vital to counter misinformation and populist narratives that threaten the integrity of the public sphere. An independent, pluralistic media landscape is also necessary to rebalance symbolic power and amplify marginalized voices, grounded in ethical standards and professional accountability.

Internally, networked movements must develop democratic practices that foster representation, reduce excessive individualism, and encourage internal dialogue to sustain collective engagement. Flexible structures must be matched by mechanisms that preserve unity and purpose.

Complementary social policies are needed to restore values of solidarity, especially in digital environments prone to fragmentation. Offline engagement—through forums, public discussions, and meetings between digital actors and institutions—can reconnect virtual mobilization with tangible civic participation.

Finally, investing in interdisciplinary research is crucial to understanding these transformations. Supporting digital archives and scholarly analysis will help document these movements and construct a collective memory that informs both academia and policy. Ultimately, the public sphere must be reimagined—not as a fixed institutional space, but as a dynamic field shaped by digital presence, fluid identities, and evolving political participation. This demands a renewed theoretical framework capable of reconciling democracy with its emerging complexities—without abandoning its pluralistic ethos.

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