

The Tunisian diaspora: Between “digital riots” and Web activism

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e-Diasporas Atlas

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The author

Teresa Graziano graduated in European languages and cultures, and earned a PhD in Geography at the University of Catania (Italy). After research at the University Paris VII-Denis Diderot in Paris, she worked at the Italian permanent delegation of the North-Atlantic Council in Brussels, in addition to being invited as academic visitor by the ICT4D Research Group in the Department of Geography of the Royal Holloway, University of London. She was also a visiting research scholar at the Tic&Migrations Research Group of the FMSH, Paris. In addition to working as a journalist in the tourist sector, she worked as an Economic and Political Geography research scholar in the Department of Architecture of the University of Catania from 2010 to 2012. She is currently collaborating with the chair of Geography of Tourism of the same University. Her main interests include the dynamics of contemporary urban spaces and the current configuration of migrations in the Mediterranean basin, as well as the study of the most recent tourist practices and patterns. Her latest research focuses on the new geographies moulded by the dialectics between real and virtual spaces, particularly with regard to the unprecedented uses of ICTs elaborated by migrants.

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Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme
190-196 avenue de France
75013 Paris - France

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<http://e-diasporas.fr>

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Abstract

This article deals with the increasing connections among the Tunisian diaspora and its homeland provided by a widespread use of the social Web. The main aim is to evaluate to what extent the Tunisian diaspora has contributed to a wider diffusion of cyberactivism concerning legitimate claims for democracy and human rights, considered as one of the main driving forces behind the 2011 revolution. After introducing some epistemological and methodological issues related to the study of the Web, the paper deepens the history of Tunisian migrants' online activism in order to grasp connections with the later configuration of the cyberdissidence in the homeland. The last section is dedicated to interpretation of the graphs, in order to compare the research hypothesises with the results stemming from the e-Diaspora project methodology.

Keywords

diaspora, web, internet, Tunisians, Arab revolutions, cyberactivism

Mots-clefs

diaspora, web, internet, Tunisiens, révolutions arabes, cyber-activisme

This paper aims at deepening the analysis of the strictly interwoven links among the social Web, migrations and democratic development, particularly in relation to the connections between the Tunisian diaspora and its homeland. In the context of an increasingly widespread cyberactivism, in particular, claims for democracy and human rights also shaped the practices of contestation during the so-called Jasmine Revolution of 2011. More specifically, the present paper aims at analysing the newly sketched-out status of Tunisian migrants, more and more inserted in the context of a growing globalization. This implies unprecedented patterns of identities, self-representation and civic commitment arising from the so-called “liquid modernity”, where frayed social relations and bewildering new virtual spaces do not jeopardize the possibility of connection. On the contrary, progressively growing connections, sprung from the widespread diffusion of the Web, have in the last decade become one of the main driving forces reshaping the geographies of migrations and communications, in addition to nourishing unprecedented typologies of (cyber) dissidence and participatory democracy.

Before addressing the specific issue of this work, I would like to underline some questions linked strictly to the elusive and over stratified nature of such a complex phenomenon, that is to say the unpredictable link between the Web, migration and political activism, in themselves already difficult to codify and analyse.

Dealing with the multilayered and multifaceted Web world implies taking into account several methodological as well as theoretical matters, linked mainly to the “hyper-ephemerality of the cybertext”, as defined by Everett (2009: 11), and depending on the “fleeting nature of short shelf-life of most websites” (Everett, 2009: 11).

In a context of distorted parameters of time and spaces, and increasingly dilating borders, one of the main characteristics of the link between Web and migration is the growing geographical mobility, both physical and even more virtual, which has increased the levels of worldwide connectivity.

Today migrants mould stratified social relationships across national boundaries and local territories. “The reference frame for migrants’ actions and decisions is not only the local one anymore, but stretches out to social spaces to

which they don’t have a geographic proximity”, so that Inter(net)connection is regarded as the new revolutionary core of contemporary mobility (Borkert et al., 2009: 5; Levitt, De Wind & Vertovec, 2003).

In effect, migratory flows leave deep marks on host societies as well on the society of origin and are the most glaring witness of the porousness of national borders. In point of fact, migrants occupy a territory, not only from the real standpoint, but also from a metaphorical one, which overcomes the traditional urban differences city imagery has been built on. This new “territoriality” process overlaps patterns and shapes settled over time, and extends to the multilayered cyberspace, which in turn reflects current dynamics of the migratory phenomenon, structured according to new patterns, very far from the dialectics of push-and-pull factors.

As a result, if it undeniable that even in past migrations there was a kind of connection with the country of origin, nowadays ICTs have “entailed a radical shift in the extent, speed and intensity of communication flows” (Borkert et al., 2009:2). Whilst in the past, the migrant status was often crystallized around the homesick rhetoric of return to the mother country, usually postponed until old age or never realized at all apart from occasional contacts by traditional mail and later on by telephone, nowadays the unlimited possibilities of connection provided by new technologies unleash new perspectives with regard to information flows, migrant status and development, both in the homeland and in the host country.

This is particularly true in Maghreb countries such as Tunisia, which has been recently experiencing unprecedented dynamics with regard to migratory flows. What is more, the country has also been seeing new uses of the Web, more and more regarded as a tool of information and communication outside the yoke of censorship. This was clearly attested during the recent uprising, which upset anciently socio-cultural structures. For this reason, the present article focuses entirely on a multilayered analysis of the Tunisian diaspora, not only from the synchronic and diachronic perspectives, but also through analyses of the connections among websites, all of which has been possible thanks to the e-Diaspora project. In particular, the main aim is to evaluate the connections between Tunisia and its diaspora by

examining the links among websites dealing with the current political Tunisian scenario, during the Jasmine Revolution and in the post-revolution period.

The Tunisian diaspora

Before coming to the case study at the core of this paper, it is necessary to frame the interwoven dynamics among Web, migrations and development in Tunisia. The country is situated in a highly contradictory geopolitical region, the Mediterranean basin, which has (re)discovered in recent years a centrality that had been lost in past centuries due to the shift of the economic axis towards North-Atlantic countries. This renewed centrality is owed to a growing number of migrants heading above all for northern Mediterranean coasts, which serve as gateways to Europe.

As far as the Tunisian diaspora is concerned, the migratory history of the country is closely linked to the process of French colonisation, with its implications in terms of unprecedented economic configurations, based on land colonisation, mine exploitation and industries conceived for the development of the western country.

As a result, the constant process of alteration of deeply rooted economic and socio-cultural patterns provoked by the French protectorate nourished the first internal migratory flows towards the most important Tunisian cities, such as Tunis, Bizerte-Ferryville, Sousse and Sfax. This urbanisation process was perfectly inserted in the wider programme of exploitation of agricultural and mining resources for export towards France, following an already-used imperialistic scheme.

After Tunisian independence – and some disastrous agricultural reforms – this exodus from rural areas to the coastal urban zones continued to act not only as an emergency phenomenon, but also as a structural one, upsetting traditional connections among spaces, communities and economic structures.

Whilst, in the last decades, internal mobility has been showing new dynamics, which no longer imply a definitive break with the place of origin, since the Fifties this time international migratory routes have come to light. In effect, during the post-war reconstruction process, many western countries opened their borders to foreign manpower. It is no accident that the former colonialist country, France, drew above all from its

ex-colonies and, consequently, from Tunisia, due to longstanding controversial relations.

Apart from the “pull” factor represented by the growing French economy, the “push” factor that drove Tunisians to move abroad was above all the painful conclusion of colonisation and the consequent crisis of the traditional economic and social structure. Furthermore, Tunisians were persuaded to migrate in order to exorcize the unexpected disappointment of the independence process. Contributing to this move was the consciousness of a structural underdevelopment, sharpened by ineffective governmental reforms, nourished a growing social unrest in Tunisian urban peripheries, which were crowded with unemployed people of rural origins¹.

However, until 1954, the Tunisian migratory route was directed principally towards neighbouring countries, such as Algeria, Egypt and above all Libya, with its highly attractive newly discovered oilfields². After 1956, France was to attract the highest number of migrants³, even to the extent that an official bilateral agreement was signed by the two governments in order to regulate flows.

The Tunisian diaspora, which was made up in the main of unemployed young men, became a phenomenon in the late Sixties, peaking at 32,480 migrants in 1971.

Nonetheless, the oil shock of 1974, and the consequent sudden economic crisis of the western powers, was a turning point in the international migratory scenario, as the growing presence of migrants postponing their return spread the dread of their settling definitively. Thus, on one hand, traditional host countries, such as France, closed their borders; while, on the other, new attractive centres, such as formerly labour-exporting countries, for instance, Italy and Spain (Labib, 2005), were coming into view. Moreover, many governments diverted migratory streams towards oil-producing countries, so that, since

1. Before independence, the international migratory route from Tunisia to France was not dependent on the traditional push and pull factors: for instance, many Tunisians were forced to join the French army during the First World War.

2. In 1954, 4,800 Tunisians went to France; 12,000 to Algeria; and 2,000 to the Middle East (Kraiem, 2002).

3. During the Fifties, the number of Tunisians in France reached 10,000, while the 1962 census survey recorded 26,000 Tunisians (Kraiem, 2002).

the beginning of the Eighties, so-called south-south migrations became consolidated⁴.

It was during the Eighties that another feature of the internal migratory system complicated an already many-sided scenario, that is to say, the irregular flows, for which Tunisia has become in recent years a nodal point as a transit country for Sub-Saharan migrants. The particular physical configuration of the country, together with the evident proximity of the Italian coasts, has been nourishing irregular displacements, which follow the dynamics of a shifting geopolitical panorama: in fact, during the recent riots in Tunisia, the Italian coasts, and particularly the isle of Lampedusa, have become the main landing points for thousands of Tunisians.

Between 1999 and 2004, year of the last official census, the total number of Tunisian who left their country was 75,773, of which 84.5% were men and 55.4% of an age ranging from 15 to 29 (Fourati, 2006). In 2004, 58.5% of migrating Tunisians chose France as host country, followed by Italy and Germany.

Today, the current global upheaval has been modifying Tunisian migratory patterns, in terms of quantity and routes, as well as social and professional composition. Furthermore, the post-for-dist global system and the diffusion of ICTs have fostered delocalisation in less-developed areas and transformed work relations by increasing the number of service workers and off-the-book jobs. It is no accident that some Mediterranean countries, affected by a widespread informal economy, have become more attractive for migrants, "forced" to accept the so-called 3D jobs: Dirty, Dangerous, Demanding.

The main push factors at the core of current labour migrations from Tunisia are the ever-lasting ineffective performance of the internal labour market and a process of democratisation, stalled for many decades, which was one of the sparks that ignited the recent riots.

Furthermore, emigration has become an instrument of national development due to the high rate of unemployed graduates, a factor that has fuelled social unrest at the very core of the revolution. In effect, one of the main features of the current Tunisian diaspora is the growing rate of highly skilled migrants, whose return rate is

4. In 1977, of a total of 28,818 Tunisian migrants, 27,313 went to Libya.

lower and lower. New, however, are the growing tendency toward diversification in the choice of destination countries, the highest rates of irregular flows being towards Spain and Italy, and the young age of the migrants (15-29)⁵.

According to the latest official statistics⁶, in 2008, 10.2% of the total Tunisian population lived abroad, of which 82.6% in Europe, particularly in France (54.6%), Italy (13.4%) and Germany (7.8%): these last two countries have been registering the highest annual average growth rates in Tunisian migrants. As far as the gender profile is concerned, the classical scheme of Mediterranean mobility patterns is still evident, with men (64.7%) predominating (Di Bartolomea et al., 2010).

The Jasmine Revolution. Democracy and webactivism

The growing social unrest, fostered by high rates of unemployment, above all among young graduated professionals, in addition to the ever-lasting yoke of censorship and a never-realised process of democratisation have been not only the main push factors of Tunisian mobility, but also the spark of the revolution which swept away the two decades of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's dictatorship during the first months of 2011.

As in past revolutions, a symbolic event was the last straw: in this case, it was the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010. He was a young vegetable merchant, who set himself on fire in protest in the internal and poor region of Sidi Bouzid. Obviously, the revolution did not break out that day unexpectedly, as other riots such as that in Gafsa in 2008 testify.

Apart from the geopolitical consequences of such a revolution, which completely upset the Southern Mediterranean scenario, with its domino effect spreading to Egypt, Libya, Syria and almost every Middle East country – the so-called Arab Spring – one feature of the Tunisian revolt has particularly struck the western audience. The growing role of the social Web has been regarded as the

5. Unemployment of highly skilled migrants was 14.8% in 2005, whilst in 2008 it was 21.6%. As a result, while in 2001 highly skilled outward flows were 19.6%, in 2008 they were 30% (Di Bartolomea et al., 2010).

6. The most recent annual report on migration by the Tunisian Institute of Statistics dates back to 2008, as does the data provided by the Tunisians Abroad Office and the International Organisation of Migration.

real driving force behind the riots: that is to say, the virtual Agora was the first place where it was possible to (re)negotiate the legitimate claims for democracy; it was only in a second stage that crowds took to the streets.

Even though many experts support the view that the role of the Web, particularly of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, has been overvalued (Ayari, 2011), it can still not be denied that the Web made it possible for the riots to be constantly reported and followed by a worldwide audience, to the point of acting as a watchdog for the tottering dictatorships. Furthermore, it is widely argued that the role of social media and the blogosphere would not have been as effective without the great stir caused by television chains such as Al Jazeera, which largely drew from online material (El Oifi, 2011). In effect, in spite of widespread access to the Internet, satellite television is able to reach an even wider audience by amplifying the already fundamental role played by social media.

Alternatively, other experts underline the primary role of the Web, particularly of social media, in shaping the patterns of the political organisation at the core of the protests: “the Arab spring had many causes. One of these sources was social media and its power to put a human face on political oppression” (Howard et al., 2011: 2).

Especially for a particular target – young, urban, well-educated individuals – the Web has acted as a key tool for conducting political conversations, exchanging opinions, claiming for liberty and accessing credible information – even before the revolution – often in advance of street protests.

It is no accident that the Tunisian government had already conceived highly sophisticated means to control Internet access and the contents of blogs, forums and other websites, going as far on occasion as to block the social media, arrest the most controversial bloggers or track online conversations. The Web was the only glimmer of liberty in a country suffocated by censorship. Obviously, “democratization movements had existed long before technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet came to these countries. But technologies have helped people interested in democracy build extensive networks, create social capital and organize political action” (Howard et al., 2011: 23)⁷. As a result, it was not technology that provoked the desire for liberty and democ-

7. The effective use of new technologies during the riots depended also on the widespread familiarity with ICTs among the 10 million Tunisians, of whom 23% are under the age of 14: there are 93 mobile-phone subscribers for every 100 people in the country, and 25% of the population has used the Internet at least once.



Twitter page of a Tunisian migrant activist and blogger

racy, but it was an effective instrument for spreading ideas and creating agreement about goals⁸.

While Facebook played a central role in networks of political discontent – more in Egypt than in Tunisia – Twitter has been used by Tunisians as a tool of connection and mobilisation, even across international borders. Apart from being an effective instrument to coordinate the political strategy, it is above all a means to spread news about the political situation with unprecedented immediacy. Video-archiving websites, such as YouTube and DailyMotion, have allowed “grassroots journalism” to cover stories the mainstream media did not treat.

The Tunisian blogosphere has always been active and cohesive in playing the role of open space for political discourse against the regime. This was already before the revolution, and it continues to play a predominant role because of its specific structure, which permits wider spaces for reflections and comments in comparison to other

8. Another specificity of the Tunisian revolution has been the growing female involvement in the political discourse. Even in this case, new technologies became effective instruments to extend women's participation: 41% of Tunisian Facebook users are female (Howard et al., 2011).

social media. In particular, the use of social media was not exclusive during the revolution: many Tunisian activists used both Twitter, to assure up-to-minute news about the riots, and their personal blogs, where it is possible to address political issues in a deeper way.

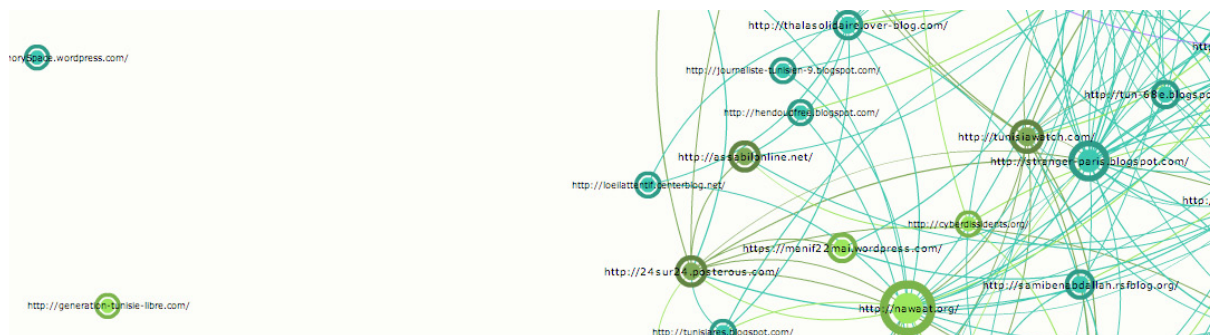
Only occasionally has Twitter completely replaced blogs, as in the case of the world-famous blogger, Slim Amamou, whose cyberactivism won him an appointment to the office of Secretary of State for Youth and Sports in the Transition Government. However, he resigned a few weeks later because of disagreements with the government.

As it can easily be seen from a detail of the graph, Amamou's personal website is a completely detached node on the extreme left-hand side of the graph, without any connections to other Tunisian activists, either in Tunisia or abroad. This is due to the gradual substitution of the blog with Twitter as the main tool of communication.

In other cases, blogs continue to be widely used. Actually, the blogosphere “is the classical social network for research because communication appears primarily in text form, and in most cases archived”, apart from the fact that the “social ties



Twitter page of Slim Amamou, the blogger-become Secretary of State



of this network are explicitly designated when a blogger provides a link to another blog” (Tremayne, 2007: X-XI). Moreover, “blogs provide not only the news of the event but also instantaneous written commentary on it.... Blogs allow for feedback from readers in the form of comment functions available at many blogs. Even readers who will not leave an opinion (probably the vast majority) get the sense of being part of an event by reading the live discourses of others” (Tremayne, 2007: XVI). As a result, the blog influence is not limited to mainstream media but also exerts an influence on the same events it is relating while they are still in progress. “Even if many individual blogs have just a few hundred regular readers, collectively the blogosphere can generate a louder ‘buzz’. Through individual link choices, this collective bestows upon a select few the ‘power of authority’” (Tremayne, 2007: XVI; Cornfield et al., 2005).

This is particularly true with regard to the Tunisian blogosphere, before and during the revolution. The analysis of contents and links carried out by Howard et al. between November 2010 and May 2011 shows direct parallels between online political engagement and street protests, confirmed by my research between April 2011 and July 2011. In effect, while before the revolution the main topic was the economic woes and Ben Ali’s leadership, after 17 December 2010, the Tunisian blogosphere dealt especially with issues such as freedom and revolution, to the point that the peak of online political discourse coincided with the size of street protests. By the third week of January 2011, 18% of all Tunisian blog posts dealt with revolution, and 10% with freedom (Howard et al., 2011). Furthermore, the Tunisian blogosphere, even the most activist fringe, has always distinguished itself by using a lay approach to political discourse: the process of secularisation

undergone by the country is reflected even in the Web, where just a few references to an Islamic vision of the events can be found.

So, it can be held that social media have caused a stir which permitted the already-existing democratic movement to spread and gain strength, as if Tunisians had “found their political voice online and [had] held their meeting virtually” (Howard et al., 2011: 5), before taking to the streets and reaching a transnational audience with an immediacy inconceivable some decades ago.

Diaspora and webactivism before and during the revolution

As far as the specific role of the diaspora in this context is concerned, the transnational aspect of the Web provided unprecedented ways of connection for Tunisian migrants, who could directly follow the frantic events in their homeland as well as, in many cases, contributing to spread news and information in a more activist way, thanks also to the freedom they enjoy in their host countries.

According to Lecomte (2009), the Tunisian diaspora played a primary role in the construction of unprecedented spaces of online contestation, particularly during the first years of the configuration of the Tunisian blogosphere, around a decade ago⁹. As a result, he argues that the Tunisian dias-

9. Internet was launched for public use in Tunisia in 1996, while the first broadband connections were made available in 2005. In spite of invasive censorship, Internet diffusion has been quite fast, with a penetration rate of 34% in 2010. For instance, the percentage of Internet users per 100 inhabitants was 2.75 in 2000, whilst in 2010 it was 36.80%. Fixed Internet subscriptions went from 36,657 in 2000 to 413,958 in 2009. Finally, fixed broadband subscriptions, which numbered 17,573 in 2005, rose to 481,810 in 2010 (www.itu.int).

pora acted as the main driving force that shaped Tunisian activism in the Web, in a second phase, by spurring the cyberdissidence of Tunisians still living in the country.

At first, the tendency to openly oppose the regime was confined to some pioneer forums and sites, which started sketching out the first virtual spaces of contestation for cyberdissidents, whose language and practices were different from those used by the classical opposition party¹⁰. The birth of Tunisian cyberactivism dates back to 1998, when two Tunisian students, Foetus and Waterman, created a diffusion list called *Takriz*, later transformed into an e-mag. In spite of the censorship that blocked this site in 2002, it distinguished itself for the biting and irreverent way in which it dealt with some red-line issues, such as religion, sex and, above all, politics. Among the twenty-two permanent members, many lived abroad (Lecomte, 2009).

Furthermore, the forum *Tunizine* was created in 2001 by Zouhair Yahyaoui, better known by his pseudonym *Ettounsi*. Imprisoned in 2002 and released in 2003, he died in 2005: he became the very symbol of the Tunisian cyberdissidence, whose experience as webactivist was held up as an example to follow. The website *RéveilTunisien* was founded in 2002 as the magazine version of *Tunizine* where it was possible to post comments and articles. It was managed mostly by non-Tunisians, even though two of the most active member were Hasni, a Tunisian expatriate living in France, and Houeida K. Anouar, who moved to Canada. After having come back to Tunisia in 2005, Houeida K. Anouar became the promoter of the “Mouvement du 18 octobre”, a hunger strike by opposition members to protest against the contradictions of a country designated to host, a month later, the World Summit on the Information Society, in spite of evident deprivations of free speech and opinion, particularly online. In her blog, Houeida K. Anouar acted as a bridge between the institutional opposition and the virtual sphere.

During this first stage of Tunisian webactivism, another fundamental website was created, mostly by diasporians: *Nawaat*, founded in 2004, whose keen influence lasts even today. Among the main

founders, some migrants stand out, such as Malek Khadraoui and Asdrubal, living in France, and Sami Ben Gharbia, living in the Netherlands¹¹. The latter has become a professional cyberdissident, constantly working for freedom and democracy in his homeland as well as spreading news about the political situation in Tunisia, even before the revolution. His commitment extends to *GlobalVoices*, a worldwide non-profit organisation of bloggers striving to promote dialogue all over the world in order to shine light on countries and events usually ignored by mainstream media.

Finally, this early stage of Tunisian webactivism dates back the diffusion list *Tunisnews*, created in 2000 by five anonymous Tunisian diasporians, most of whom were political refugees. If compared with the other dissident contestation sites, deeply rooted in the lay tradition of Tunisia, one feature is particularly striking: the Islamist bias at the core of the main activity, which consisted in selecting subversive articles and news by privileging Muslim sources.

Often gravitating around these well-known websites, a nebula of more personal virtual spaces complete this picture of early Tunisian webactivism, such as, for instance, *Alternatives Citoyennes*, created by the independent journalist, Nadia Omrane (Lecomte, 2009).

The *fil rouge* among all these dissident websites is that they were – and in part are still today created or managed mostly by Tunisian diasporians, who pioneered webactivism in their homeland. Even though it could seem quite paradoxical, the hidden reason is easy to guess: Tunisian migrants had free access to the Internet, without any of the technical or cultural restrictions that had made Internet access or use of the social Web very difficult, if not, in many cases, dangerous in Tunisia. What is more, the possibility of comparing their own situation, where free speech was an undeniable right, made them even more eager to access and spread information without the yoke of censorship, to the point that they were able to “infect” their fellow-citizens by contributing to spread webactivism even in their homeland.

10. In this article, the words “cyberdissidents” or “cyberactivists” refer to people dealing with political issues in blogs, websites and forums, without any reference to institutional or political opposition parties.

11. Sami Ben Gharbia became a cyberdissident after having been “forced” to surf among Tunisian websites of contestation to support his request for political refugee status (accepted in 2004). As a result, he did not have a culture drenched in hacker principles but was instead an exile who discovered the power of the Web not only for his personal interests, but as an instrument to fight for his homeland.

From the start, Tunisian webactivism distinguished itself both from institutional opposition, actually strictly dependent on the dictatorship, and independent opposition, made up of associations or marginalized parties. The difference stemmed from its tendency to use a much more informal language, often challenging and satirical. According to Lecomte (2009), the highly specific patterns and practices the first generation of cyberdissidents exploited to build their own virtual space of contestation, often in contraposition to classical opposition, are reminiscent of the newly conceived public sphere outlined by Nancy Fraser (2003), who contested the unified elitist bourgeois public sphere theorized by Habermas in favour of a multiplicity of public spheres. In point of fact, at the beginning, in spite of the populist attitude, drenched with the hacker culture of democratic sharing, Tunisian cyberactivism revealed itself to be quite elitist, being supported by a specific urban target, often living abroad, which had home Internet access.

With the turning point of 2005, which marks the multiplication of the Tunisian blogosphere, the contrasts became more striking. In particular, the more activist cyberdissidents, such as Sami Ben Gharbia, accused Tunisian blogs of being like “tourist areas”, very far from local poverty, completely drenched in the rhetoric of political correctness. A year later, Asdrubal even described the Tunisian blogosphere as a “lobotomisphere”, due to its widespread lack of commitment. It was *Big*

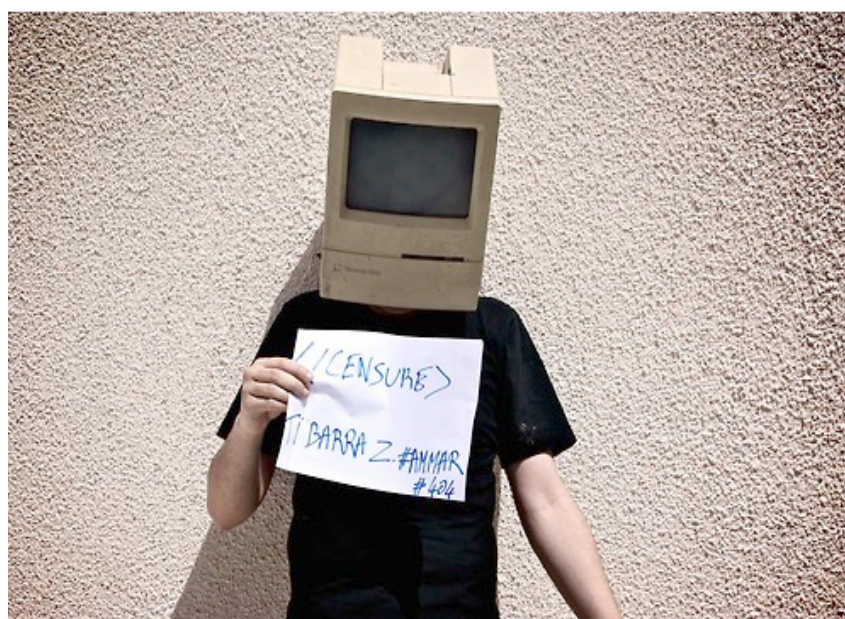
Trap Boy, living in Tunisia, who asserted Tunisian bloggers’ right to fight against the regime without explicitly dealing with political issues, but instead by exploiting the multifaceted stonewall language, which makes it possible to bypass censorship and, consequently, avoids blockage of the blogs.

A deeper analysis reveals that the contrast between “soft” and “strong” cyberactivism is not only a question of language register, but it also recalls the gap between dissidents living in Tunisia, forced to cope with a proliferation of deprivations, and Tunisian diasporians, free to express their own opinions.

However, in the five years before the revolution, this gap was slowly diminishing. Despite the different levels of contestation, the blogosphere has been converging towards a shared commitment, critical of the *res publica*. Nonetheless, the tendency to use a devised language, apparently harmless but actually deeply subversive thanks to the subtle weapons of irony and parody, is still a dominant feature of the Tunisian blogosphere¹².

Despite the parallel and fast diffusion of social media such as Facebook, the Tunisian blogosphere has continued to play its predominant role even in the last two years, a role characterised by

12. The blogger Carpe Diem Selim, who lives in France, considered the style used by another blogger, Arabicca, living in Tunisia, as the highest example of the ironic nuances of language, where it is possible to catch more information from what has not been written than from the explicit statements (Lecomte, 2009).



A picture of the web campaign against the 404 error found page

a growing diffusion of the spaces of contestation. This growth is attested by the widespread success of the Web campaign against censorship in 2009, during which Tunisians all over the world took pictures showing the *404 error found* page, which appeared when the censorship blocked a website.

Contemporary with increasingly invasive censorship and continuous violations of human rights, the still young and relatively small¹³ Tunisian blogosphere contributed to covering red-line issues otherwise neglected by mainstream media by acting as “a dynamic alternative forum for the practice of free speech” (Freedom House, 2011, www.freedomhouse.org)¹⁴.

Finally, with the outbreak of revolution, connections between diaspora and homeland became more and more frequent and cohesive, accompanied by a growing alignment of patterns and prac-

tices of contestation due to the unprecedented glimmers of freedom unleashed by the riots.

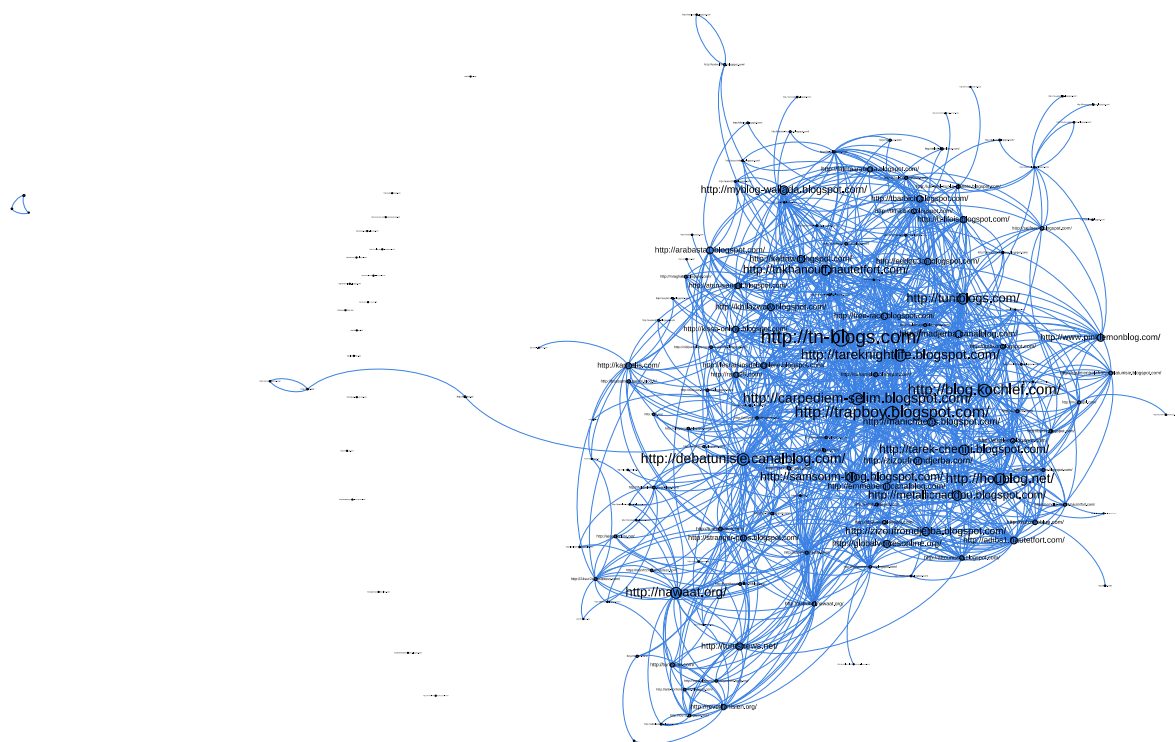
Today, the above-mentioned Tunisian migrant activists are still important nodes within the network of connections and relations encompassed within the e-Diaspora project, where the thick fabric of links connecting the Tunisian diaspora dealing with the political situation with Tunisian activists still living in their country is particularly evident.

Interpretation of the graphs

The main aim of this research is to evaluate which kinds of connections can be found in the Web between the Tunisian diaspora and its homeland with regard to political activism. In constructing the corpus I therefore started with websites of Tunisians dealing with the current political situation using a series of keywords in the most known search engines, such as Google. Later on I used the semi-automatic exploration of the Web provided by Navicrawler. This rough corpus was subjected to two automatic crawls and, after an other analysis of contents in order to filter the

13. After the proliferation of blogs in 2006, Freedom House detected 500 active blogs in 2010.

14. In 2008, for instance, it was the blogosphere that covered the labour riots in the Gafsa mining area, while in 2010 Tunisian bloggers launched a campaign against the imprisonment of a group of students demanding more rights for female students.

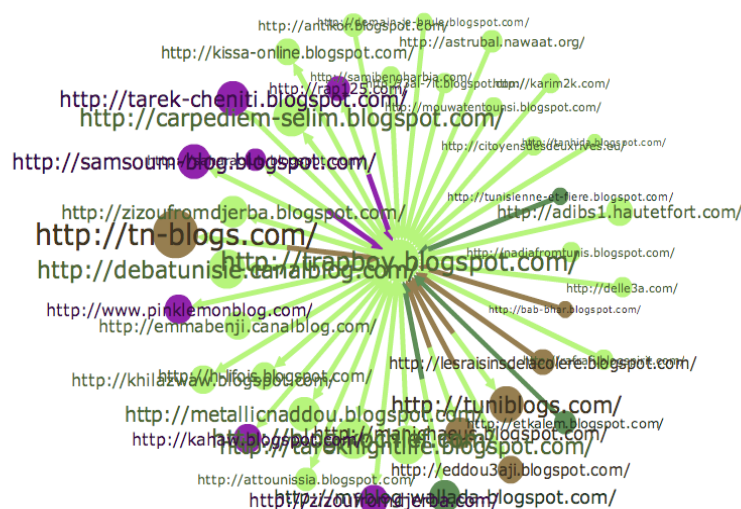


General map of the Tunisian diaspora

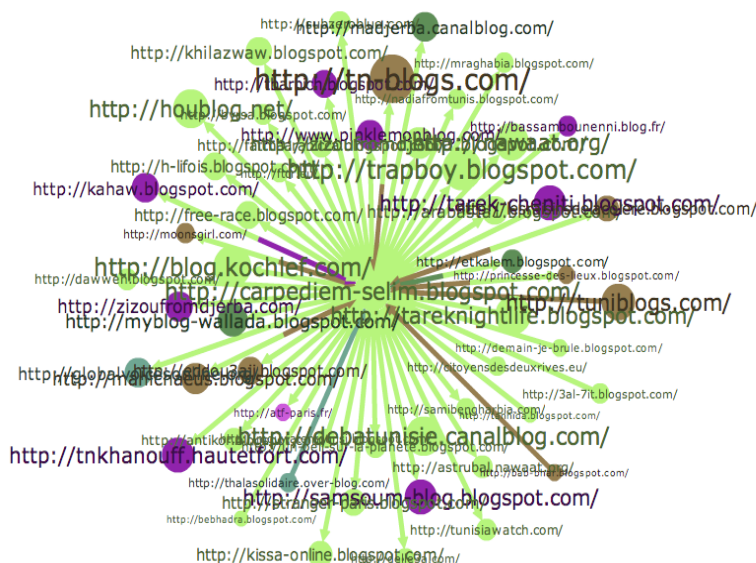
the sphere of cyberactivism and cyberdissidence (intended in a wider sense, without any reference to institutional political opposition).

By analysing the map from a general point of view, the distribution of nodes shows a relative level of homogeneity and density, apart from some nodes, situated at the extreme left periphery of the graph, completely detached from the main cluster.

The cartography of the corpus confirms the presence of a relatively homogeneous Web community in terms of distribution of connections and tendency to polarisation. However, a deeper analysis, supported by the topological statistics, reveals striking differences with regard to the



Detail: graph "main activity"; subgraph "politics"; the node trapboy.blogspot.com



Detail: graph "main activity"; subgraph "politics"; the node carpediem-selim.blogspot.com

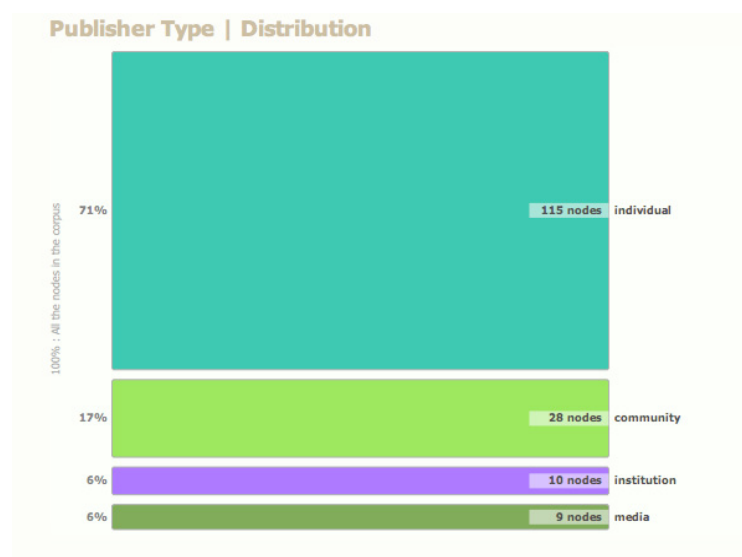
main activity carried out within the websites, the countries of residence, the used languages and so on.

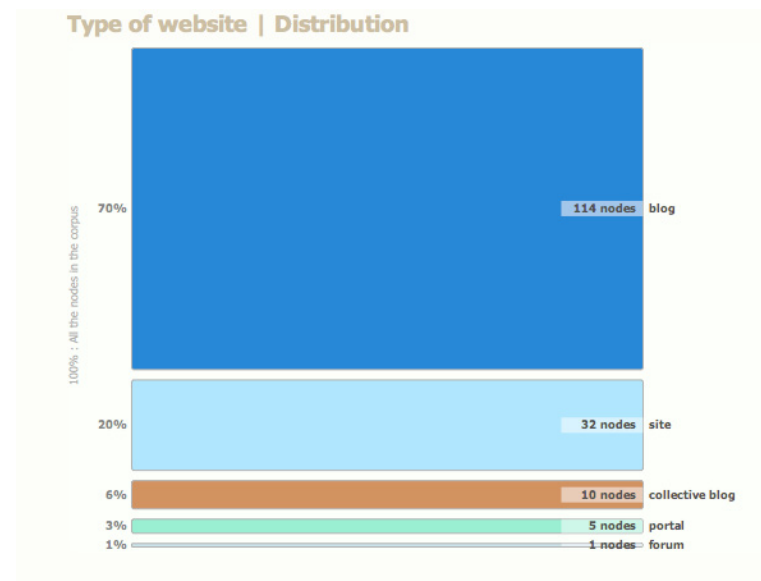
From a morphological standpoint, it is not altogether easy to distinguish real clusters within the graph, which is made up of a set of different main components, rather than being dominated by one at the centre of the map. Nonetheless, it can be useful to distinguish some areas, which are structured around the larger nodes, surrounded by other smaller nodes, whose spiderweb-like configuration, rather than single-centred star pattern, indicates the presence of a community. In particular, in the right-hand part of the graph, an area of deep density, turns out to be configured around different nodes of similar size, such as *samsoum-blog.blogspot.com*, an authority node (23 inbound edges; 14 outbound edges), *tareknightlife.blogspot.com*, a hub node; whilst in the left part, despite being less dense, the tendency to clusterization is detectable around the website *debatunisie.canalblog.com*, which turns out to be equally an authority and a hub (28 both inbound and outbound nodes, with 10 mutual links). However, the most important nodes, situated at the centre of the graph, are the authority *trapboy.blogspot.com* (32 inbound edges, 23 outbound edges) and the hub *carpediem-selim.blogspot.com* (28 inbound edges, 44 outbound edges). In the upper part of the graph, the density of connections can be easily explained because the top nodes are portals aggregating Tunisian blogs (*tn-blogs.com*; *tuniblogs.com*). These were included in the corpus because they reflect the growing tendency of the Tunisian blogosphere to deal with political

issues, even though they can be regarded mainly as frontier sites.

In the lower part of the graph, on the contrary, there is the important node represented by *nawaat.org*, the collective blog managed by activists all over the world, which imposes itself as an authority because of the high number of inbound edges (28 inbound edges, 1 outbound edge), even though the cluster around it is not as dense as other parts of the graph. Nonetheless, this area gravitating around *nawaat.org* shows itself to be a community by the presence of connected nodes, of smaller sizes, but important for Tunisian webactivism, such as *asdrubal.nawaat.org*, *stranger-paris.blogspot.com*, *samibengharbia.com*. The latter is the blog managed by one of the founders of *nawaat.org* and acts as an important hub (5 inbound edges, 38 outbound edges).

Moreover, on the extreme left periphery of the graph, many nodes are completely detached from the centre. These are institutional websites of embassies or associations, which are either very far from the main cluster or have very few connections. This clearly testifies to a well-known feature of institutional websites, that is to say, that they are generally “display websites” with low levels of sharing and participation reserved for users, who are mostly consumers and not “prosumers”. Finally, 6% of nodes are media sites: as a result, so-called “grassroots journalism” is probably practised more by not-professionals than by true journalists, since the goal of spreading information about the Tunisian political situation has been pursued by generic citizens above all inside the blogosphere.





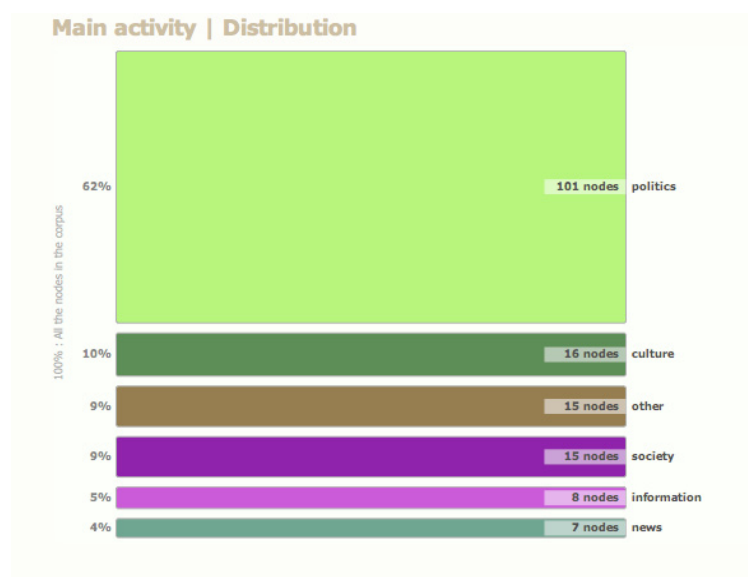
As far as specific attributes are concerned, the graph “Publisher type” shows a clear prevalence of “individuals”, 71% of nodes: this can be a symptom of a tendency to use Web connections individually, even though the social capital is no less important for this reason. The communities are thus made up of many individuals gathering together rather than being formed only within a website.

As far as the individual subgraph “Individual” goes, it is clear that the individual sites tend more to cite than to be cited. The connectivity capital of the subgraph is in deficit, because there are fewer edges of the graph pointing to it from outside the subgraph (131 inbound edges) than outwards from the graph (164 outbound edges).

Finally, it is no accident that 113 “individual” nodes, that is to say 98%, have “blog” as a value for the attribute “type of website”, thus highlighting the strong and almost natural tendency to use individually a Web tool such as the blog, due to its intrinsic feature of being a journal dedicated to personal comments and opinions.

The predominance of “blog” as the “type of website” attribute is not surprising: 114 nodes (70%) are personal blogs, which gather in a quite homogeneous pattern, gravitating around the main nodes without evident clusters.

If we consider “blog” as a subgraph, the connectivity capital is in deficit, since there are 157 inbound, and 162 outbound ones. A highly specific feature of this subgraph is that no blog bears

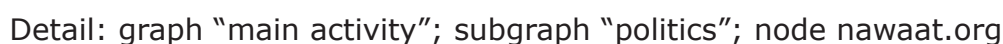


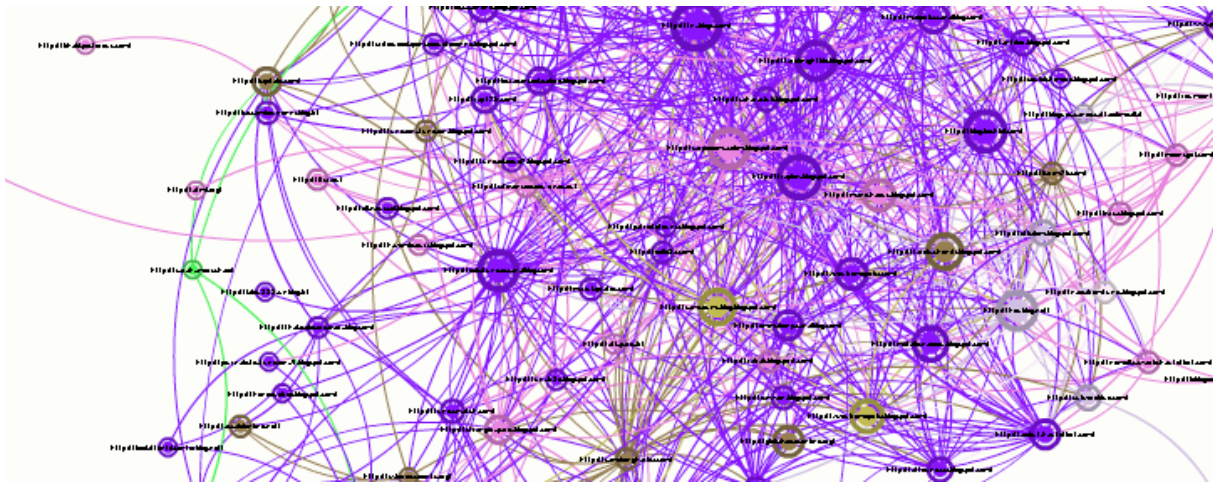


However, the community structuring around the authority node *narwaat.org* indicates a polarisation in terms of “main activity”.

Furthermore, 79% of nodes dealing with the Tunisian political situation are blogs, thus explaining once again the tight link between personal comments and such a social media.

A deeper analysis of the subgraph “politics” shows that the core of the Tunisian activism is concentrated inside the homeland (64% of nodes), while the nodes dealing with “politics” as “main activity” are managed by Tunisian living abroad (23%, of which 14% in France). This outlines a quite different picture of the apparently unbridgeable gap between a well-rooted diasporian cyberactivism and a still-hesitant online dissidence inside Tunisia, as was the case at the beginning of the configuration of the first Tunisian virtual spaces of contestation. In fact, if we take into account the attribute “country”, the most important nodes





Detail: graph “country”: blue: Tunisia; pink: France; dark brown: Other country; Lilac: Canada; light brown: USA; green: Germany

are represented by people still living in Tunisia (59%): among these nodes, there are high levels of connections, as shown by the tendency to polarisation, even though many links are established with nodes whose values indicate other countries of residence¹⁵.

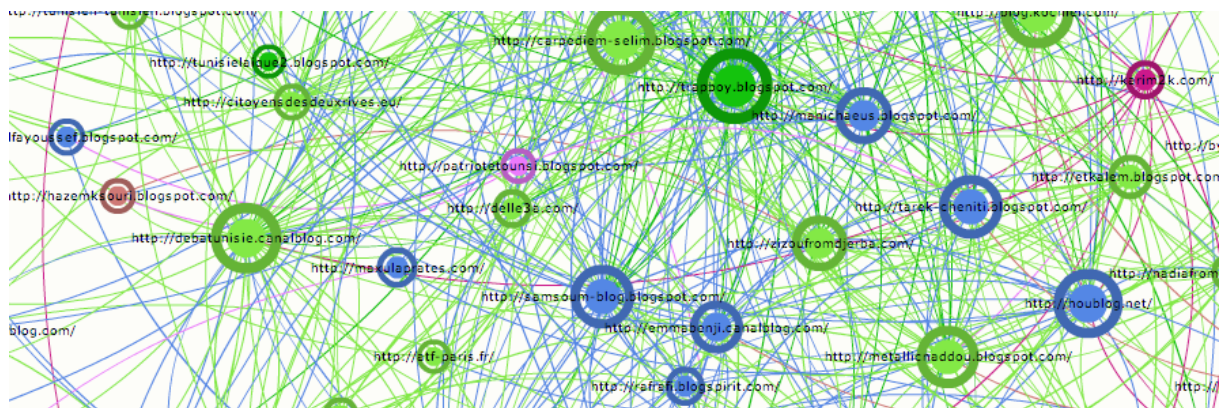
What is more, 45% of nodes which address political issues have “French” as a value for the attribute “language”, just 13% only “Arabic”, while 28% give both “French and Arabic”, thus showing, on one hand, the will to reach a greater audience and, on the other, the widespread penetration of the

former colonialist language, above all among the specific target of Web users, that is to say urban, young and well educated.

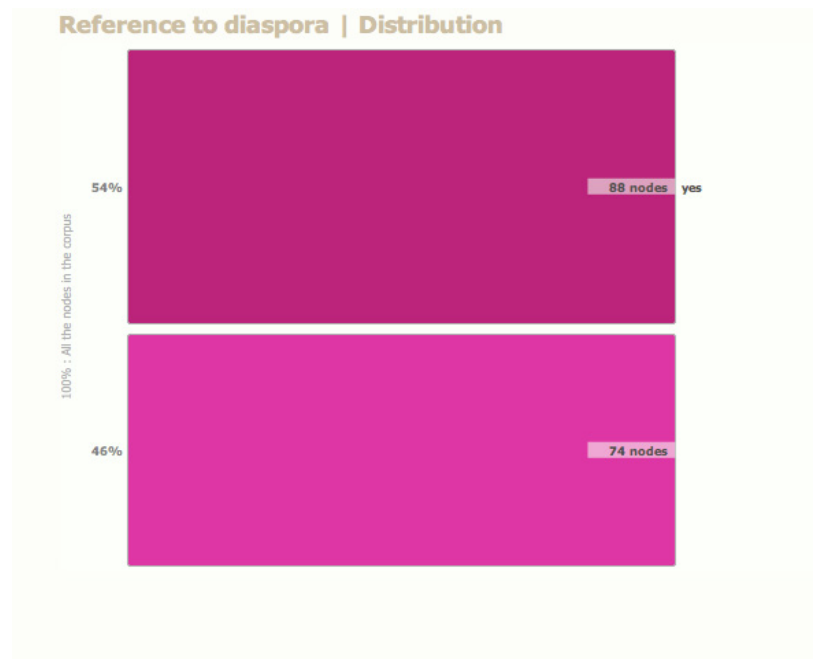
However, if we deeply analyse the attribute “language”, a less-marked tendency to polarisation appears, as well as less homogeneity of distribution of nodes with the same values. What is more, even though “French” is the most widespread value (44%), and above all in the homeland¹⁶, many top nodes, like *nawaat.org*, have “French/Arabic” as a value, thus testifying to both familiarity with a more globally known language and the will to keep identity and cultural roots through Arabic.

15. As far as the value “Tunisia” is concerned, its connectivity profile with other countries shows that Tunisia has 219 inbound edges (106 from France, 46 from Other countries), and 211 outbound edges (70 to France, 32 to Other countries).

16. Concerning the distribution of “French” with regard to the attribute “country”, 58% of nodes with “French” as a value for the attribute “language” also have “Tunisia” as a value for the attribute “country”.



Detail: graph “language”: light green: French; blue: French/Arabic; light pink: French/Arabic/English; dark pink: English



If we take into account the attribute “reference to diaspora”¹⁷, there is a fairly homogeneous distribution among diasporian and non-diasporian nodes. As far as the first are concerned, 56% of diasporian nodes deal with “politics” as “main activity”, and 44% are written in French, thus aligning to general parameters of the whole map, which show a predominance of the two values. Finally, the distribution of diasporian and non-diasporian nodes with regard to the attribute “country” is not equal, since 26% of diasporian nodes have “Tunisia” as a country of residence, while 37% of diasporian nodes have other countries (mostly France, 27%). Clearly, the migratory status is at the core of the websites managed mostly by Tunisians living abroad.

Conclusion

To conclude, the current relationship among Web, migrations and development in Tunisia has provided an unprecedented chance to cross over borders and frontiers, both geographically and symbolically, in order to strengthen a progressively growing transnational community. As demonstrated by the case study, migrants have become the main connection points of a widening network, the fundamental driving forces not

only of the economic progress of the homeland, in terms of remittances and investments, but above all with regard to its social development, particularly linked to the real possibility to access the “information highways” by eluding censorship.

The multifaceted and dispersed virtual space of contestation has been consolidated by the proliferation of social media in the last six years, to the point that many Tunisian netizens have discovered the highly attractive power of such tools to advocate their legitimate democratic claims.

However, the most striking feature outlined by this work is that, whilst at the beginning of the Tunisian cyberdissidence diasporians were the main driving forces, after some years social media started being used as platforms for political commitment above all among Tunisians still living in the country. Obviously, styles and patterns of contestation were very different, as is attested by the widespread use of irony among non-diasporians.

It is after the revolution that this gap has been fading, by enlightening the effervescent world of online Tunisian activism, made up of a steady network of nodes and connections with regard to political commitment. Furthermore, according to the content-based analysis I carried out from a diachronic perspective, many bloggers started dealing with controversial political issues during the revolution, even though they were not true activists before.

17. The diagram without any value refers to a blank row inside the corpus, in order to suggest that no reference to diaspora has been found, while the value “yes” indicates that a reference to diaspora has been found, in a wider sense: that is to say that the site is made *by* or *for* migrants, or deals with migratory issues.

Thus, it is indubitable that the Jasmine Revolution was not unleashed by social media *tout court*, but it can not be forgotten the irreplaceable role they played – and continue to play – in spreading news of the riots and in strengthening public awareness as well as consolidating the links of a transnational Tunisian community that is becoming increasingly cohesive with regard to the shared goal of democratic development.

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