

Zayani, M. *Networked Publics and Digital Contention: The Politics of Everyday Life in Tunisia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

In June 2016, Mohamed Zayani was awarded the “Global Communication and Social Change Best Book Award” from the International Communication Association. As Associate Professor of Critical Theory, Director of the Media and Politics Program, and Research Fellow at the Centre for International and Regional Studies, all at the Georgetown University (Qatar), Zayani is well-placed and well-equipped to deliver a study that explores the role of the ‘digital’ in social movements and politics during the Arab Spring. Zayani provides a comprehensive consideration of history, structures of governance, demographics, resistance, and watershed events, interwoven with the continuum of growth in information and communication technologies (ICTs). An “electronic uprising” is only identified late in the text (p. 156). Thus, Zayani’s work does not simply chronicle a tale of cyber heroes and an unsuspecting regime; instead, he provides the necessary social and political insights to assist the reader in understanding Tunisia and, more broadly, the role of social media in social movements, all the while avoiding the quick search for a catalyst that has created many superficial conclusions about the primacy of social media.

In the Forward, John D. H. Downing, Editor of *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*, situates Zayani’s study against the dominant narratives put forward by what he characterizes as “the Western commentocracy” on the Arab Spring, which tends to fall into two “reductive” camps: The first knows little about the region and remains caught up in the “digital transformation of Arab-hood,” as the “stereotype of Arab emotionalism [is] fused with the instantaneity of ‘social’ media.” The second dismisses the role of ICTs, and gravitates instead to the theme of “continuity,” sketching a portrayal in which the Middle East was, they argued, what it had always been leaving the significant youth demographic as a “statistical abstraction” (ix). In the Introduction, Zayani makes clear that his study was prompted by “significant dynamics” that had yet to be explored. These included the “statistical abstraction” conceptualized as the ‘youth factor.’ Certainly, the fact that one half of the Middle East and North African region’s population is aged under 25-years cannot be ignored. However, a youthful population bulge alone does not precipitate revolution. Under close examination, Zayani observes that this demographic does not simply equate with the use of social media for political purposes. Instead he points, more rigorously, to a key difference between current Tunisian youth and earlier generations: the current under-25s are shaped less by “pan-Arabism or communism” and more by “new defining vectors,” which include social modernization, consumerism, religious revival, and “a deeply fascinating cyber-culture” (p. 5). Zayani observes that while not unique to Tunisia, these vectors are experienced differently across the Arab world. Thus, he avoids what he terms “a pervasive tendency to homogenize the Arab digital experience” (p. 7).

Zayani’s hope is that the Tunisian experience will “bring into focus the intricate relationships among digital culture, youth activism, cyber-resistance, and political engagement” (p. 7). His fieldwork was conducted in Tunisia between 2011 and 2013, and included interviews with people across a range of social spheres and strata, including journalists, politicians, online dissidents, and regular Internet users. The question that pushed this study forward was his quest to understand “what happens when networked Arab publics are shut out of the political arena under an authoritarian political system,” and so he shifts attention from political institutions to “the informal politics of everyday life” to demonstrate how “two decades of unchallenged rule” were toppled in a matter of weeks (p. 8). Of particular interest to this reviewer is the momentum that propelled the revolution following an event in the margins of the micro-economy: the suicide of street trader Mohamed Bouazizi, pointing to the need to explore the lives of the socially marginalized for what they reveal

about power in that society. Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the local government building after harassment by the local authority and became what Zayani terms “a galvanising symbol of the uprising” (p. 8).

The Arab Spring may have been initiated by the marginalized in a provincial town, but the public response to the authoritarian crackdown that followed the outrage over this suicide spread throughout Tunisian society on the social Web. Still avoiding the rush to credit only social media, Zayani reminds the reader that the “glorification” of social media cannot negate the “simple fact that revolutions predate the Internet” and that “movements are about actual grievances, demands, and aspirations” (p. 11). Social media arrived into a society and a people who had won the country’s struggle to oust colonialism—a society that had been a breeding ground across time for other spheres of activism including civil society involvement (p. 52). The role, then, of social media within the Arab Spring was to provide what Zayani conceptualizes as ‘digital spaces of contention’ to describe “an amalgam of social interactions” including “ordinary activities” and “mundane pursuits”; these, he says, “intersect and are embedded in media experiences, anchored in participatory networks, and intertwined with processes of communication” (pp. 12-13). Despite the speed with which information is shared in social media, it was nonetheless a long journey to victory for cyber-activists, with setbacks and barriers along the way, all detailed thoroughly by Zayani.

He begins by taking the reader through a brief history of post-Independence politics to contextualize Ben Ali’s regime¹ and the discontent of Tunisians. Part of that regime’s strategy was to push something of a ‘Tunisian Dream,’ positioning the country’s economic success as being within reach of those who dare to want material success and its trappings. However, the regime was very much absorbed in the appearance of prosperity, showcased in an economic development model that embraced ICTs but pandered to the business elite in order to silence the voice of organized labor. Thus, some “economic players” were privileged, and they, in turn, put their support behind the regime and its messages (p. 41). Ben Ali also adopted neoliberal economic policies that assumed that prosperity would ‘trickle down,’ though in reality such policies simply created a society of “cheated dreamers” (p. 42), with a struggling middle class and, according to the World Bank, a general unemployment rate of 14%. More significantly, this rate was doubled among the under-25s and tripled among college graduates (p. 44). As Zayani points out across the text, many left Tunisia to find work, which meant a large and dissatisfied diaspora would later communicate with the discontented at home via the Internet.

As for Internet use in Tunisia, Ben Ali himself was responsible for a turning point in the revolution in 2005: Tunisia hosted the World Summit on Internet Society, intended to showcase the country’s modernization and the regime’s support for innovation internationally. Clearly, however, he did not bargain for what the availability of the Internet would mean for the regime’s future (the underestimated potential for which was clearly demonstrated when traditional means of silencing dissent were applied to Internet use and users). With time, the ubiquity of the Internet in the lives of Tunisians was also fuelled by the increased availability of the Internet in homes and the development of smartphones. And as its use became widespread, Zayani notes, so too did the regime’s work to limit or silence the voice of protest; this gave rise to a diverse and “fierce battle over Internet control” (p. 138). A watershed moment arrived in the spring of 2010 when a broader anti-censorship movement formed that transcended social and political boundaries. The focus of this movement meant that the regime’s practices (though not the regime’s presence) were being condemned. The movement adopted the slogan “Sayeb Salah,” Tunisian slang for a simple and innocuous admonition: “enough...leave me alone” (p. 156).

As the resistance gained traction, atypical or creative opportunities (precipitated by social media) were shaped and seized to form a comprehensive and successful revolt over

time through various means and messages. For instance, one message used plane-spotting databases (which allow access to time-stamped photos of planes on runways) to publicize the use of Ben Ali's presidential jet on shopping sprees in Europe (p. 105). Another saw a literary blog, Kissa Online, publish passages from Pablo Neruda's *The Liberators*, and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, a novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez about a fictional dictator (p. 124), meant to resonate with Tunisian readers. In an ironic twist, the White Note Campaign spread word of discontent over censorship through silence: an Internet boycott, of sorts, that called for a day of no blogging. According to Zayani, this meant that censorship was, ultimately, "contested through its own logic." More important, it was an "event that promoted solidarity" and one that was subsequently successfully staged annually between 2006 and 2009 (p. 144). As for Facebook, its use in Tunisia rose from 16,000 in 2008 to 1.82 million at the close of 2010. On the "eve of the revolution," a third of the country's 10.6 million inhabitants had access to the Internet, and nearly half that number were using Facebook, a platform that provided a somewhat sheltered space that, Zayani offers, allowed users to blur the boundaries between the public and the private (p. 170).

Ultimately, Zayani is successful in helping the reader understand the development of the Arab Spring and its contributing phenomena beyond superficial conclusions and convenient sound bites. Zayani has skillfully compiled a study that considers how the Internet and social media met and mixed with what Foucault conceptualized as 'historical contingencies,' a blend of intersecting events, social factors, and pre-existing power relations, which combined to fuel a revolution. Again, the study is detailed, thorough, and convincing in answering the questions Zayani sought to answer. In producing such a work, he also provides a template that encourages replication elsewhere.

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¹ Zine El Abidine Ben Ali became the Prime Minister of Tunisia and assumed the presidency in 1987 following a blood-less coup. He held the post until toppled in the revolution in 2011. He and his family fled to Saudi Arabia and remain there in exile. He was tried and convicted *in absentia* by Tunisian courts on charges including corruption, theft, inciting violence, and for the violent suppression used to shut down demonstrations in the lead up to the Arab Spring.