All the sides of censorship:

Online media accountability practices in pre-revolutionary Tunisia

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Abstract

The historical formation of the national media field in Tunisia shows that media accountability issues are mainly shaped by the autonomization and professionalization of journalists vs. state control and censorship. Scrutiny of the transformation with the national media field since the end of the 1990s reveals the emergence of several mechanisms and new spheres of debates, which are contributing to shape a nascent movement of reflexivity and criticism on news making practices and representations of society. Online journalism and others initiatives are evolving between continuities and ruptures with the traditional media. The continuities are related to the different positioning of the profession vis-à-vis state control. When the ruptures occurred the Internet offered possibilities to widen editorial freedom, to enhance independence from advertisers and to diversify public expression of opinions. This report explains the developments in media accountability online just before the revolution at the end of 2010. Interviewees were granted anonymity considering the political situation at that time.

1. Context factors in the development of media accountability online practices

1.1. Media legitimacy and existing media accounting institutions: hegemony and legitimacy crisis

Media legitimacy in Tunisia is a key issue of debates about media accountability (MA) and more generally about media's social role. At the same time, MA is a real challenge to researchers because of the lack of data related to audience perceptions of journalistic contents. However, the scrutiny of the field shows that the issue resurfaces every time the media need to report major nationwide events: civil riots, terrorists' attacks, strikes, and demonstrations but also floods. In the 1980s, two European TV stations **RAI Uno** and **Antenne 2** revealed the gap between the national media discourse and societal expectations by informing Tunisians about national events that had been silenced or distorted by official propaganda. In 1992, a rare survey asked 3,000 Tunisians about the "objectivity and reliability" of TV stations' news. **RAI Uno** was classified as the best by 64 % of respondents, followed by **Antenne 2** (57%) and **Tunis 7** (36 %) (Ferjani 2002: 159). A few years after the advent of the Direct Broadcasting Satellites (DBS), audience studies show a continuum of the divorce between the national traditional media and their public in so far that an average of 50% of the daily audience watches foreign TV stations: mainly French in the late 1990s and pan-Arab stations ten years later[1]. This persisting dividing line can explain the distrust of the national media's ability to be accountable to the public.

Despite the differences between traditional and online media, the gap seems to be persistent. This is due to the dual state policy enhancing the production of "Tunisian web contents" and the use of the Internet and at the same time controlling and prohibiting access (Ferjani 2011b). The legal bodies concerned by the media accountability issues, The High Communication Council (CSC) and the journalist Union (SNJT) are failing to strengthen professionalism of online media organizations: As an advisory body, the CSC is since its creation in 1989 unable to intervene in the public debate. Web journalists have no legal status and most of them still in 2010 are deprived of press cards (see below).

1.2. Internet user cultures

One can simply argue that the uses of the Internet are framed by the paradoxical state policy, which enhances and tightly controls public debates and public access to contents. But the facts

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[1] Sigma Conseil, *Bilan 2007, une année de publicité en Tunisie et dans le Maghreb,* Tunis, janvier 2008, p. 20*.* Mediascan (2010), *La Lettre mensuelle*, Octobre 2010 p. 8.

and figures of the Tunisian web are also marked by the different ways, means and devices used by citizens to blur the lines and bypass censorship.

Table 1: Internet Usage and Population Growth

Year	Users	Population	% Pen.	Usage Source
2000	100,000	9,666,900	1.0 %	ITU[1]
2006	953,000	10,228,604	9.3 %	ITU
2007	1,618,440	10,342,253	15.6 %	ATI[2]
2008	1,765,430	10,383,577	17.0 %	ATI
2009	3,500,000	10,486,339	33.4 %	ATI

[1] International Telecommunication Union
[2] Agence Tunisienne de l'Internet (Tunisian administration of the Internet)

Unfortunately, the available data reflect only partially this complex reality. Table 1 data are based on national estimates provided by the same source: the Ministry of Telecommunications. The calculation basis is not the real number of household really connected but the total number of connections subscribed (including those of companies, associations and public administrations). Even if they do not reflect exactly the Internet penetration in Tunisian society, these methodological inconsistencies have political significance insofar as they allow the host country of the second World Summit on the Information Society (2005) to be ranked in Arab World just behind the Gulf States.

Another important indicator of the Internet users' culture in Tunisia is the development of social networks. But the uses are also framed by state control. From the outset, YouTube and Daily Motion were censored in Tunisia. Others followed more recently: Vimeo and Flickr. Facebook had to suffer the same fate. In August 23rd 2008, access to Facebook was denied to 28,000 Tunisian subscribers. Reporters without Borders and many Pan Arab media reported the news. The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) columnist's comment in **Attariq Al Jadid**, an oppositional newspaper, reflects the emotional wave spread among the Internet users' communities:

> "What has bitten the ATI to ban this site whose popularity is growing? A group recently formed by a dissident? Facebookers' discussions about the situation of the mining area [Gafsa]? Maybe we'll never know. Nevertheless, by its dynamism, the number and the quality of its members and its diversity, this site carries the promise of a virtual civil society. Indeed, it's the meeting point of young people called by the official discourse to join associations and to take an active interest in politics"[2].

As censorship is never commented on by officials, the daily newspaper **Le Temps**, reported ten days afterwards "*We heard that the President of the Republic personally intervened and gave instructions to reopen Facebook immediately, once he had learned of the closure of public access to*

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[2] http://attariq.org/spip.php?article95&lang=fr [17/09/2010]

this site in Tunisia "[3]. The 18 comments posted on the online version of the newspaper were divided between *"thanks Mr. President"* and *"the list of blocked Web sites is still toooooo long*."[4]

The exponential increase of Facebook's accounts can be linked to heated debates generated by the growing interest in social networks. The short-lived censorship of Facebook had expanded its reputation beyond the narrow circle of initial users. In June 2009, the number of subscribers was estimated at between 400,000 and 800,000[5]. This meteoric rise is due to the spread throughout the country of a rumor about the abduction of children and organ trafficking. After a long silence, the Minister of Justice revealed in June 2009 the identity of the source "of this rumor": a retired academic - and a human rights activist - who was apparently the first to post the "rumor" on her own wall on Facebook and to send it to her friends. Accused of "spreading false news likely to disturb public order" (Press Act, Article 49), she was sentenced on July 2009 to 8 months in prison.

With 1.82 million accounts in November 2010[6], Tunisia was ranked 52nd by Facebook, placed between Finland and Japan. According to the same source, 17.2% of the total population and 50.5% of the online population have Facebook accounts. The latter statistic ranked Tunisia in the top 20. The distribution of subscribers by age shows that the generational divide is comparable to other countries insofar as the most frequent users are the 18-24 year age group (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Users age distribution on Facebook in Tunisia (2010)
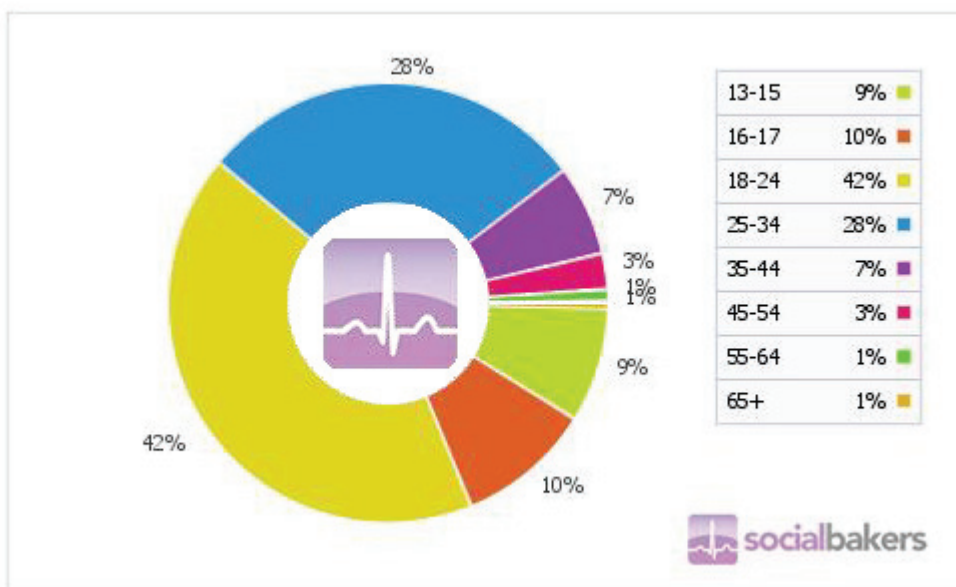
Source: facebakers.com

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[3] *LeTemps,* 01/09/2008
[4] http://www.letemps.com.tn/article.php?ID_art=19890
[5] http://www.Tekiano.com/net/web-2-0/2-7-1196/tunisie-facebook-bat-de-nouveaux-records.html
[6] http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/tunisia

The gender ratio (Men:Women) of users on Facebook in Tunisia is 59:41. This gender ratio is less pronounced than in other Arab countries (68:31 in Algeria and Saudi Arabia, 62:38 in Egypt and Morocco) but slightly higher than those of Jordan (58:42) or Lebanon (55:45).

However we can emphasize that data provided by Facebook are a selling point to attract advertisers. They comprise several biases that may question the reliability of the statistics: the opening of several accounts by one person, inactive accounts, the difficulty of users to delete their accounts and the inability to distinguish regular users from occasional ones.

1.3.   Online journalism development

There is a great temptation in journalistic circles to consider that the main difference between online and conventional journalism is the margin of freedom that journalists would have on the web. Moncef Mahroug, former contributor to several newspapers and magazines, is currently editor of webmanagercenter.com, "*I gave up the traditional press because of the lack of freedom. From this point of view the online journalism is a chance* "[7]. Even some people close to the regime draw similar conclusions. Senda Baccar, who created *Erricha* [The Pen] on Facebook, in March 2008, says she turned to the Internet to "*give Tunisian journalists greater space for expression and means to communicate more easily with each other*".[8]

One of our interviewees shares the same optimism

"we have opened new frontiers, since I don't write about political issues and I do not attack head on the officials. Some topics such as censorship, piracy [a social phenomenon in Tunisia] or new cultures are not well seen here, but I am sometimes surprised that some departments did not call us to order. I think that they don't take us seriously. So much the better! Curiously we are constantly called to order by the major telecom companies: Tunisiana, Tunisie Telecom and Orange ... My freedom also comes from the closeness that I have with my editor. He is young, graduate in journalism and we share the same passion for ICT. We discuss the choice of subjects but also how we will treat them...."[9]

Several cases of news reporting could be cited to support the idea that online journalism is relatively less controlled than traditional media. In October 3rd 2007, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer visited Tunisia, ranked 11 in the top 20 countries for cultural industries piracy (Ferjani 2011b: 88). The news coverage of the event in the traditional media was a mixture of copy/paste from Microsoft press releases and State propaganda. Whereas, the mainstream media were focusing on "the Microsoft award for global leadership in ITC" awarded by the President of the Republic, Maryam Omar titled her article on webmanagercenter.com "*Steve Ballmer était-il le*

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[7] http://www.magharebia.com [03/04/2008]. Unless specifically annotated, all quotes were translated from Arabic or French by the author.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Interviewee with the author [17/11/2010]

bienvenu pour tout le monde?" [Was Steve Ballmer welcome for everybody?]. She was the only journalist to reveal the real purpose of Microsoft CEO's visit: to put his signature on a US$14.2 billion agreement to sell e-government software solutions to the Tunisian state.[10]

Nevertheless such initiatives remain individual and time bounded. Rather than establishing common projects to develop best practices of transparency and professionalism, those initiatives allow their initiators to exist in the journalistic fields or to promote their lucrative activities as advertising and PR companies. More generally, online journalism's ability to widen the possibilities of journalists' freedom cannot be denied but it would be unwise to succumb to the lure of technological determinism by considering that the Internet has radically changed journalistic practices. Analysis of main trends of online journalism and the possibility to make it more accountable to the public have to be based on the fact and figures of the field.

The starting point of our analysis was Alexa.com classification. In October and November 2010, 38 online news media[11] were referenced in the top 1000 most visited websites (see Table 1 in Annex). The sociological reading of this ranking is a real challenge insofar as Alexa ranking does not reflect the audience share of traditional media nor the audience interest. Some technical reasons intervene to put one media or another in the top or in bottom half of the list. Indeed, some of them pay for their search engine optimization procedures when others are located outside Tunisia and consequently are not considered in the ranking. In addition, **Alchourouk** and **La Presse**, the leading print newspapers market seem to be waiting until the web reaches critical mass before increasing the amount of investment in their online editions.

Despite its randomness, the Alexa ranking allows the drawing up of the significant trends of online journalism in Tunisia.

- 22 of the 38 listed sites are electronic versions of existing traditional media, linked by their legal status or by their editorial line to the State.
- The news web sites are mostly business and ICT oriented: **Webmanagercentre** launched in 2000 has been followed by many others: **Business News**, **African Manager**, and recently by **Kapitalis** (March 2010). Taking advantage of its success, webmanagercenter launched Tekiano, a specialized news web magazine, in April 2009.
- From a media accountability perspective, it would be interesting to emphasize a third category, located between the closure to the state and the Business/ICT orientation. **Tunivisions**, **Tuniscope** and **Tendancemag** are electronic versions of

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[10] http://www.webmanagercenter.com/management/article.php?id=34210 [11/10/2007]. Maryam Omar is the pseudonym of a wellknown columnist in a daily newspaper.
[11] By news media we refer to web sites posting updated news once a week at least. We excluded news aggregators and newsletters.

print magazines but also advertizing agencies. ***Leaders.com.tn*** does not have a print version but the editor is also manager of THcom, a public relations company.

Blurring the lines between State controlled news, public relations, business interests and sometimes professional reporting, Tunisian online journalism is evolving without specific legal framework. A journalist in the online version of mainstream newspaper summarized the "identity crisis" of the traditional online media

> "My work is technical and not journalistic. I'm supposed to post online without any rewriting the international and cultural sections of the print version. I'm not supposed to answer to readers even if they write to me. But I have a press card and I'm affiliated to the SNJT, which is not the case of my colleagues working in news websites"[12].

At the opposite end of the spectrum another journalist working in a news website told us

> "to write about new cultures, I don't need a press card, I contact artists directly by e-mail or through Facebook..., I see their work, I meet them and I report. For ICT subjects I prefer the field reporting to press conferences covering. I try to test what the companies want to sell, if the services or devices are ok, if the consumers are satisfied or not. To be honest, we have a division of work inside our little newsroom: One of my colleagues goes to press conferences and responds to the claims of companies often angry about my papers. The field work allows me a distance and a sort of freedom"[13].

2. Practices initiated by the media: Media accountability as a promise

During the fieldwork (interviews, web content analysis) we realized that MA issues were more like an ideal typical construction (in the Weberian sense) than a continuous process or even a component of a conscious (and claimed as such) editorial strategy. As summarized in Table 2, MA practices are either existing or emerging. In this section we will try to outline and explain the differences of definitions and interpretations between the top 10 online media.

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[12] Interviewee with the author [12/11/2010]
[13] Interviewee with the author [17/11/2010]

Table 2: Prevalence of Media Accountability online practices within Tunisian media organizations

	ACTOR TRANSPARENCY				PRODUCTION TRANSPARENCY					RESPONSIVENESS			SOC NET	
	Published Mission Statement	Code of Ethics	Profiles	Owner Information	Bylines	Links	Journalist Blogs	Newsroom Blogs	Collaborative Writing	Online Ombudsman	Online Comments	Error Button	Twitter	Facebook
Mosaiquefm.net	YES		YES	YES		YES					YES			YES
Tap.info.tn	YES			YES										
Assabah.com.tn				YES	YES								YES	YES
Webmanagercenter.com[1]	YES		YES	YES	YES	YES					YES		YES	YES
Businessnews.com[1]	YES		YES	YES	YES	YES					YES		YES	YES
Attounissia.com.tn[1]				YES	YES									YES
Jawharafm.net	YES		YES	YES							YES			YES
Tunivisions.net	YES			YES	YES						YES		YES	YES
Tuniscope.com	YES			YES	YES						YES		YES	YES
Tekiano.com[1]	YES			YES	YES	YES					YES		YES	YES

[1] News websites

2.1.   Actor transparency

Actor transparency[14] involves practices where media organizations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories. Article18 of the Press Act states that

> "Every periodical has to publicize the names of its managers. In addition every periodical shall mention the number of printed copies on each of its deliveries. It must also publish its annual report, management accounts and results before 1st July of the year following the year, for which these operations are completed. Every contravention of the provisions of this section is liable to a fine of 100 dinars to 1000 dinars"[15].

The explicit reference to print press leaves great latitude to online media in implementing this provision. Some titles, like **Webmanagercentre** comply strictly**,** others such as **Attounisia** indicate only the manager's name.

Moreover, Article 18 refers to "managers" [*ceux qui en ont la direction*] and does not mention the owner. The terminology's vagueness allows the majority of online media to conceal their owners' identities, which is in fact key information when the manager does not own the media outlet. **Essabah.com**, like its print version, mentions Mohamed Sakher El Materi[16] as the director of publication, which is not the case of **mosaïquefm.net**, which as indicated in the web site of the holding, is owned by Karthago Group[17].

Most online media organizations publish their mission statements although there is no legal obligation to do so. Nevertheless this legal vacuum is a source of an elastic interpretation that can be summarized in three trends:

1. Some titles define the mission statement in the sense of greater transparency of their organization. **Webmangercentre** may be the most emblematic example of this trend. Its section "about us" explicitly raises professionalism "*Online since September 2000, webmanagercenter has invested in developing on the Tunisian web, as reliable, useful and high quality economic and financial information*". **Webmanagercenter** is one of the few online media that released its traffic statistics as a transparency indicator (or marketing argument)[18].

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[14] The typology of practices has been defined by the research team in the Work Package 4 of the MediaAcT project. We reproduce an excerpt of the definitions in each section, but the reader is invited to see the introductory document for this collection of country reports for more details.

[15] Loi organique n°88-89 du 3 août 1988 modifiant et complétant la loi n°75-32 relative au code de la presse, *Journal Officiel de la République Tunisienne*, 2.08.1988.

[16] Son in law of President of the Republic and owner of Princess Materi Holding Company

[17] Headed by Belhassen Trabelsi, brother-in-law of President of the Republic.

[18] After two annual reports (2007 and 2008), WebManagerCenter tested the monthly statistical reports between January and September 2009.

2. Missions statement may also mix objective information: "*Jawhara FM Radio is a Tunisian, generalist, private, broadcasting in Arabic (Tunisian dialect) on FM. frequencies [...]*" and public relations discourse "*Its studios are located in Sousse, one of the finest resorts on the Mediterranean sea [...]. Jawhara FM is young, it is conceived for all tastes and ages.* "[19]

3. **Tunivisions.net** is most striking example of final trend i.e. the confusion between what should be a published mission statement as a proof of actor transparency and the marketing document targeting audiences and advertisers. Since April 2010, *Tunivisions*' "about us" section embeds *Tunivisions 2.0,* a 28 pages document where CEO Nizar Chaari[20] exposes the interactive strategy of the print magazine and the website: "*Readers' lives: this column is totally dedicated to Tunivisions' readers. Be the Star of the month, subscribe to our competition on our website. Win the largest number of votes; you will have your Tunivisions exclusive interview! Connect, participate, perhaps you'll be elected*"[21].

The absence of specific ethic codes or even links to the SNJT's Ethical Code[22] underline the problematic status of web journalists but also mask the pressure and connection of the economic interests in the media field. In addition, the exposure of journalists profiles is seldom practiced (4 of the 10 analyzed web sites did do so). The two private radios have a staff section, in which journalist's photos are embedded without any references to their specialties. The lists of newsroom's members are available in **Webmanagercentre** and **Businessnews**. Analysis of some production transparency indicators may lead to a better understanding of the relative paucity of actors' transparency.

2.2. *Production transparency*

Production transparency denotes practices where media organizations disclose to users information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of producing news. Indeed, the analysis of the top 10 list shows a continuum of the problematic depiction of journalists. One can underline the disjunction between the permanent collaborators, stated by the total absence of journalists' blogs and news room blogs and the lack of bylines as normative practices. Whereas 3 online media publish news without any reference to their writers, we found a wide range of differences between the other 7 media and within the same media. The analysis of the bylines of *Jawharafm.net* is an interesting case study for understanding the shifting of

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[19] http://www.jawharafm.net/accueil/radio-tunisie.html [26.11.2010]
[20] Chaari is also the CEO of Tunivisions PR agency and TV host of the 'Ahna Hakka' programme.
[21] http://www.tunivisions.net/index.php?f=page&pageId=8 [17.09.2010]
[22] Available since January 2009 at http://www.snjt.org/images/snjt/reg.pdf

professionalism. The profiles of the journalists are those of the radio station. But all articles of the news section are signed by two webmasters who are graduates in web design and not in journalism. The abundance of articles written in an unusual style (too lengthy sentences, the absence of the 5 W rule…) is an outstanding feature of the paradox between the growing need to educate journalists and the political will to maintain the journalists' education under the control of a single academic institution: The Press Institute (IPSI).

In **Assabah**, **Attounissia**, **Tunivisions** and **Tuniscope**, articles are posted with but often without any references to authors. For signed articles, bylines may be the full name or the initials of the authors and sometimes the first name or a pseudonym. **Businessnews**, **Webmanagercenter** and **Tekiano** have the most stable bylines guideline: primarily, bylines indicate the author's full name, and occasionally the initials or refer to the story's source(s). From this point of view, bylines are an indicator of production transparency and a feature of professionalism. Logically, articles in these three news websites are linked to sources which are not usually self-referenced (News agencies, governmental reports etc.).

Online media often argue that interactivity represents their main difference with traditional media. The focus on the Tunisian case illustrates the gap separating the sincere will, the real fear and the strategic positioning of professionals toward collaborative writing and the deficiency of such practice in news reporting.

According to a news website journalist

> "the collaborative writing is a too advanced stage compared to the reality of online media in Tunisia. We have firstly to establish our legitimacy among public institutions' leaders, some of whom don't even know that we exist and consider us like a group of playful teens… At the same time we have to make a difference with advertisers disguised as journalists. If I begin to say my articles are also written by my readers, the legitimacy battle is lost […] We have also to keep in mind that collaborative writing raises the questions of citizenship… it's hard to find the way to put it into practice!"[23].

At the opposite side, some online media mask this hardiness behind an enthusiastic marketing discourse. **Tunivisions** is once again a case study of the representation and practice gap:

> "Tunivisions is team of journalists who daily informs you about Tunisia. However, we know today the scoops come primarily through the Internet. That's why we create for you a collaborative space where after checking we publish on the website your photos, videos and articles. Tunivisions.net is in tune with the participatory web sites.
> How to collaborate on Tunivisions.net? :
> - Note: assign a score to content according to your interest;
> - Flag: report content that seems inappropriate;
> - Comment: give an opinion or participate in a discussion;
> - Enrich: add information to existing content;
> - Edit: propose a correction, clarification or the addition of illustrations;
> - Publish: write a brief article, produce audio, video.

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[23] Interview with the author [12/11/2010].

> Tunivisions.net is also fun and airiness with lots of gifts to win! We build bridges regularly with social media where we recruit participants to the various competitions
> [...]
> Tunivisions becomes your magazine, you have to make it live!"[24].

Nine months after being published, the interactivity praise could be read as a promise except for the comments on articles. But there also practices vary according to editorial strategy of the different online media.

2.3. Responsiveness

Responsiveness denotes news organizations' reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance. As presented in Table 2, the dividing line between media allowing readers comments and those which do not promote such a practice is less than the original form of the media (news website or online version of media outlet). But either or both the closeness to the regime and the editors' inability to consider users comments as part of online media contents. The news press agency (***tapinfo.tn***), ***Attounisia*** and ***Kapitalis***[25] do not have any spaces dedicated to comments. ***Essabah.com*** has a comment button under each article but comments remain invisible to the readers. This is also the case at ***La Presse.com*** and ***Alchourouk.com***[26]. The latter, does not appear in the top 10 list but has an outstandingly noteworthy attribute. ***Alchourouk*** is unique among Tunisian online media for displaying the number of hits under each article.

Posted comments are regulated by "comments codes" which may vary between implicit quotations of Press Act's repressive sections "**Mosaïquefm** *has the right to delete any illegal or immoral content (advertising, racist, slandering, offensive, etc)...*"; plagiarism of French comments codes "*xenophobia and revisionism*" (***Tuniscope***) and a relative transparency towards readers "**Business News** *would like to thank its readers for their comments, which contribute to enriching the online newspaper. This space reflects a multiplicity of views on the sole condition that these views will respect each other*". However, published comments codes does not guarantee transparent and fair practices.

One of our interviewees stressed, ironically, the unspoken media professionals' mistrust for readers' comments:

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[24] http://www.tunivisions.net/index.php?f=page&pageId=8 [17.09.2010].
[25] Not included in the top 10.
[26] Also not included in the top 10

> "we have two kinds of news commentators. Some of them, living abroad, don't read the rules and let off steam. I'm sometimes shocked by violent reactions, inappropriate comments... unpublishable! The second category is the silent majority who participate in the "non-opinion culture"... Readers are clever, I think. They can read you but they have not always confidence in you to tell what they really think... If we organize competitions with 100 dinars' prize for the winner of "the best comment of the day", our web server will be out of order in few hours..."[27].

Many other journalists and webmasters share the same doubts about the value accorded to the comments as a reflection of public opinion in a country where public speech is hardly restricted by state propaganda. Between the silent majority and the steam off attitude, a small way seems possible to allow expression of opinion that may appear innocuous. In the Tunisian context, those opinions are in fact political, as demonstrated by the following comment on an article devoted to a TV producer

> "Semi Fehri and his pathetic serials represent the minority in our society ... 95% of Tunisians have no swimming pools and the latest models of four-wheel drives. If he has the means to obtrude on our national channel despite our will, at least he have to work with dignity and respect to the people who finance his industry. Allah guides him [to the straight path]!!"[28].

There was no reason for either the commentator or the journalist to emphasize that Semi Fehri is production manager of Cactus owned by the Karthago Group.

2.4. Social networks

The main finding of this section would be the widespread linking to Facebook (9 of 10 analysed websites) and slightly less to Twitter (7 of 10) and the various ways of using social networks. The majority uses different processes (the 'I like it', 'Fans' and 'Share' buttons) to increase the visibility of content rather than creating spaces of responsiveness. **Tunivisions** and **Tekiano** had already added links to other networks (*Disqus*, *Netvibes* ...) and seem to be in competition to appear as "early adopters and innovators". Several websites display, on their front page, the number of their fans on Facebook to prove their popularity (66,000 for **Tunisivions**, 55,000 for **Jawharafm**, 37,000 **Tuniscop**, 16,000 to **Tekiano** and 12,000 for **Attounissia**). This is not the case at **mosaïquefm** (158,000)[29], which is orienting readers toward its website contents.

If online media seem to underuse social networks in MA innovative practices, more scrutiny on the research field may reveal the different ways deployed by users to force online and offline media to reflect the opinion's movements shaping on social networks.

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[27] Interview with the author [12/11/2010].
[28] http://www.tunivisions.net/attaque-radicale-contre-sami-fehri-et-cactus-prod-sur-facebook,45.html# [21/08/2010].
[29] 30th November 2010

3.   Practices initiated outside media

The context and content analysis of online media (un)accountability practices has underlined the difficulty of accurately tracing the contours of online journalism. Lack of clear legal framework, mixed forms and confusion among several professions: journalists with or without press cards, webmasters, advertisers..... Thus, a heuristic definition of MA outside media organizations becomes even more difficult. In this section "outside media" refers to practices initiated by groups or individuals who do not present themselves as journalists and who use the Internet as a platform to make the different actors of the field accountable: journalists, media organizations and state institutions.

The first significant initiative related to online media criticism was ***Takriz.org*** (1999-2002, 2008-present)[30] which presented itself as the "1st Tunisian e-mag 0% dullness". ***Takriz*** did not specialize on media criticism, but a plethora of topics ranging from bureaucracy, corruption, boys and girls relationships, God, boredom, social apathy etc. Nevertheless, in the context of nationwide events media criticism was one of ***Takriz***' more frequent topics (Ferjani 2011a: 176). This is not the case of ***Boudourou.blogspot.com***,[31] the only specialized Tunisian blog on media criticism, i.e. "*special interest for articles that do not respect journalistic ethics concerning dullness and misinformation*" (Ferjani, ibid.).

The impact of such initiatives has been very limited. In this section we propose first to shed more light on bloggers' impact and second to widen the perspective by exploring the ability of social networks users to foster the freedom of expression. From its beginning, ***Takriz*** was immediately (and is still) censored in Tunisia. Its harsh criticism restricts the circle of loyal readers and even some contributors who henceforth disavow its radical line. One of our interviewees, a former ***Takriz*** collaborator, explained that:

> "we were angry young students, Takriz was our space to point what was going wrong, to say our difference, to exist in some way. Ten years after, it's high time to change, to be more constructive, to propose solutions... I'm more interested to participate on social online initiatives to empower people, for example, than by media criticism because everybody knows that official media lie and since long time. Our project for the country has to be based on persuasive arguments not on hate speech".[32]

Boudourou is managed by a group of five Tunisian (resident) bloggers. Their aim was to promote the dynamics of citizens' media criticism by calling the readers to vote for three prizes: gold, silver and bronze Boudourou, in three categories: the worst article of the month, the worst

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[30] In Tunisian Arabic 'Takriz' means 'fed up'. A new version of the website exists since 2008. It has retrieved some of the archives of the first version.
[31] Dourou' is the lowest value coin in Tunisia. 'Sahafa boudourou' is the literal translation of the 'penny press'.
[31] 58 in 2007, 25 in 2008, 17 in 2009 and only 2 until May 2010. [15.12.2010]
[32] Interview with the author [08.12.2010].

journalist and the worst newspaper. However, the 'Boudourou prize' dynamics seem to be failing to attract readers. The posting frequency is declining[33] and the 630 fans on *Facebook* are mostly well-known activists or anonymously hiding their identities behind pseudonyms. However, beneath the site's banner, the blog states that "*Boudourou is an independent and neutral blog paying attention to the Tunisian press. The blog has no affiliation or political objectives*" and repeats the same message in its editorial and posts. But a closer examination of content may reveal the commitment of the **Boudourou** bloggers to denounce with an offbeat humor the dark side of the official press.

Other online initiatives[34] share common denominators with **Takriz** and **Boudourou**: personal or group blogs paying attention to media criticism and trying to keep a distance from the political establishment i.e. the regime but also its opposition. Nevertheless, blogs remain censored in Tunisia. As noted by many blogosphere observers "Tunisian bloggers have not been able to escape the intensely repressive state policing of the media" (Lynch, 2007: 16). One can ask if the uprising of social networks displaces the two ends of blogs media criticism: censorship and displayed depoliticization?

The answer to this question may be summarized by two trends: the maintenance of a radical line regardless of the risk of censorship and the invention of new forms of practices trying to be connected to the ground and taking in account the limits of bloggers movement.

The Facebook account "*shabab tounis la yahtaj ila achbah assahafiyin, fa howa assahafa*"[35] [Tunisian youth don't need pseudo journalists, he is the media] cannot be representative of all initiatives mushrooming on Facebook, however it may exemplify the changes and continuities between the bloggers movements and social networks activism:

- A claim belonging to cyber activism culture: "We are the media".
- A harsh criticism confirmed by frontal attacks against the national media "*Every nation has a disaster. Our media and our elite are our own disaster: This new channel* [Nessma TV] *is bearing the standard of guardianship on Tunisians considered as minors from birth to death. See the vast amount of fallacy…*".
- A critic calling for respect of ethical principles but it often slanders namely, journalists, TV hosts, singers...
- Recurrence of moral denunciation that does not necessarily adhere to political Islam but relays a conservative ideology openly for war against "immorality and secularism". This trend is corroborated by multiple links to other Facebook accounts such as "Tunisia, Islam and Arab voice, authenticity and modernism voice" or to"

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[33] 58 in 2007, 25 in 2008, 17 in 2009 and only 2 until May 2010.
[34] Nawaat.org and debatunisie.canalblog.com are interesting cases even though their different writing styles (news articles, video and comments for the first, satire and cartoons for the second).
[35] http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/Tunisian.Young.Media?v=wall

Psycho M" a conservative rap singer. In spite of the relatively low number of "Tunisian Youth…" fans[36] the used links connect a tiny number to a wider network sharing the same interests and ideology.

In contrast with **Tunisian Youth**, the "Ammar 404"[37] movement against censorship would be more interesting to highlight the new opportunities of social networks to reach out to the masses of Tunisian Internet users.

In April 2010, following a massive wave of online censorship, targeting major social networks, such as the popular video-sharing websites, Flickr, blog aggregators, blogs, Facebook profiles and even Skype, the anti-censorship movement adopted creative uses of ICT to go beyond the closed circle of cyber activists. Indeed, "Ammar 404" was initiated by a small group of bloggers who broke with the tradition of anonymity by posting their pictures on Facebook (relayed by Twitter) with a white poster "404" and calling Tunisians to do the same. This online protest generated a range of other initiatives:

- A petition aiming to gather 10,000 signatures against censorship; it has surpassed the planned target with more than 12,000 members on Facebook at the end of May 2010[38].
- An open letter to the President ("404 not found" is spoiling the image of my country)[39]. 8,000 members had joined the Facebook page in May 2010.
- The index of banned blogs, websites, Facebook and twitter accounts[40];
- An outreach effort to involve the artistic and media figures in Tunisia.

However, the virtual protest culminated in a non-virtual one with *Nhar 3la 3ammar* [hard day for the censor]. Two activists and bloggers, Slim Amamou[41] and Yassine Ayari[42], called for a rally in front of the Tunisian Ministry of communication technologies on May 22nd, while ensuring to request a permit, respect the legal procedures and insisting on the apolitical and peaceful nature of the movement. They were arrested and held for 12 hours in May 21th and forced to cancel the rally.

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[36] 2400 in 18.12.2010

[37] Ammar is a metaphor of ATI, invented in the wake of the bloggers protests initiatives in 2006 (Cf. Lecomte, 2009). In Tunisia, the banned sites are signaled by "error 404 not found" and not "error 403 forbidden". 404 is also a renowned brand of pick-up vehicle in use in the rural areas since the late 1970s.

[38] http://www.facebook.com/pages/rydt-al10alaf-twnsy-dd-alrqabt-alalktrwnyt-walhajb/ [17.07.2010]

[39] http://www.facebook.com/freefrom404 [17.07.2010]

[40] http://www.facebook.com/notes/nhar-3la-ammar [17.07.2010]

[41] http://nomemoryspace.wordpress.com

[42] http://Mil7it.blogspot.com

From the start of their online presences, some online media have hijacked the apolitical positioning of the protest for political ends. In an editorial of May 3rd 2010, Nizar Chaari, Director of ***tunisivison.net***, featured the initiators of the movement as "net stars" and asserted that the wave of censorship has no political character but was due to an administrative strike. According to Chaari,

> "Several sources close to ATI, confirm that this wave of censorship abuses, was the way that the strikers have found to put pressure on their employer and force the agency to accept their demands. Such practices are generally observed at SNCF [French railways company], where French travelers become hostages of the union's purposes"[43].

The breach opened by Chaari would be widened by Olfa Youssef[44] who did not chose her regular column in ***Essabah***, but her own blog, to assert cautiously

> "In our dear Tunisia, some jurisdictions bar access to certain sites. They are called "Ammar". As to my age, I can no longer support childish protest nor yet be instrumentalized, I tried to understand the causes of this censure / punishment [...]. Suppose that we are minors who ignore their interests, and that we should be protected or even some of us punished, could we know the reason and legitimacy of our punishment? Why not a press conference to explain everything? We will appreciate you and the country too, because maybe you have never read Piaget nor Lacan or even Zizek, but a punished child ignoring his fault could be very dangerous when he becomes adult ... Maybe you don't think about the future, dear Ammar ."[45]

It may be too early to draw definitive conclusions about the role of outside media initiatives to foster media accountability but we can already emphasize their ability to adjust the media agenda: Facebook is becoming one of the main scene for current events but also a relay of more deeper debate on Tunisian society.

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[43] http://www.tunivisions.net/ces-anonymes- qui-sont-devenus-des-stars-grace-a-ammar,179.html
[03.05.2010]. The article is no longer available [15.12.2010].
[44] Olfa Youssef academic director of the National Library.
[45] http://olfayoussef.blogspot.com/2010_05_01_archive.html

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Annex

Table 1: Tunisian Rankings of online media 31st October and 30th November 2010

URL Address	Ranking 31st October[1]	Ranking 30th November[1]	Tunisian links[2] (%)
Mosaiquefm.net	11	12	83.9
Tap.info.tn	52	36	84.2
Assabah.com.tn	33	38	61.8
Webmanagercenter.com[3]	*35*	*41*	*73.8*
Businessnews.com	*41*	*48*	*80.9*
Attounissia.com.tn	*47*	*54*	*85.9*
Jawharafm.net	46	60	82.4
Tunivisions.net	55	63	79.4
Tuniscope.com	51	73	77.7
Tekiano.com	*60*	*74*	*78.9*
Radiotunisienne.tn	75	85	82.8
Shemsfm.net	56	104	91.6
Leaders.com.tn	*75*	*121*	*81*
Africanmanager.com	*115*	*124*	*69.8*
Zitounafm.net	127	130	97
Koora.com	*104*	*131*	*33.5*
Lapresse.com	114	133	66.8
Tunisie7.tn	155	141	53.1
Alchourouk.com	161	145	48.7
Akhbar.tn	124	168	67.9
Letemps.com.tn	175	178	70.4
Kapitalis.com	*112*	*182*	*68*
Alhorria.info.tn	215	190	72.1
Espacemanager.com	*156*	*226*	*89.6*
radioexpressfm.net	256	238	92.2
Infotunisie.com	185	248	73.6
Hannibaltv.com.tn	301	273	61.1
Nessma.tv	394	288	31.5
Essahafa.info.tn	182	301	46.6
Tustex.com	237	348	86.5
Tunisiait.com	295	372	75.1
Tunisiehautdebit.com	*314*	*507*	*91.8*
Tendancemag.com	823	540	68.5
Jetsetmagazine.net	308	541	53
Nsens.tn	232	623	81.7
Destinationtunisie.info	640	809	96.1
L'expertjournal.com	1587	850	86.2
Tunisiaonlinenews.com	*568*	*891*	*50.4*

Sources: [1] Alexa.com; [2] Google AdPlanner; [3] The italic differentiate the online media from the electronic versions of existing traditional media.