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The Spark That Lit the Flame: The Creation, Deployment, and Deconstruction of the Story of Mohammed Bouazizi and the Arab Spring

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THE SPARK THAT LIT THE FLAME: THE CREATION, DEPLOYMENT, AND

DECONSTRUCTION OF THE STORY OF MOHAMMED BOUAZIZI AND THE

ARAB SPRING

BY

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Abstract

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The story of Mohammed Bouazizi is credited with being the "spark that lit the flame,"

first of the Tunisian Revolution, then the Arab Spring as a whole, creating a domino

effect that brought down the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan and Yemeni leaders, and

threatened to topple still more. In this thesis I explore the narrative structure of the

Tunisian revolution, how the story of Mohammed Bouazizi represented that structure and

how the narrative sparked the Arab Spring. I also ask how narrative is created and what

role social media played in allowing this particular story to become a part of the national

narrative. Through an examination of the Tunisian narrative in history and from multiple

angles, I endeavor to place Mohammed Bouazizi's story in its proper context. Finally, I

come to the conclusion that the story is more a product of collective narrative and

consciousness than a triumph of truth in media

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Introduction

The story of Mohammed Bouazizi is credited with being the "spark that lit the flame," first of the Tunisian Revolution, then the Arab Spring as a whole, creating a domino effect that brought down the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan and Yemeni leaders, and threatened to topple still more. Many other Arab governments pushed through varying levels of reform legislation to save themselves from the same fate. How could the story of one young man prompt such widespread and dramatic change in the region? His was not the only, or the first, story of wrongdoing by autocratic regimes in the Arab world. Every country touched by these events had scores of stories that could have been the one that started the revolution, but this tale, told in this way, at this time, with these particular reactions from the Tunisian government, created a revolution that ousted Ben Ali in only 27 days.

The story of the revolution is not only about the people and events involved; it is also about how the Ben Ali government lost its ability to control the national narrative, and how another came to replace it. Because the national media outlets were government controlled, this new narrative emerged through the intentional and accidental collaboration of social media users, international newspapers and European and pan-Arab satellite television.

In this thesis I explore the narrative structure of the Tunisian revolution, how the story of Mohammed Bouazizi represented that structure and how the narrative sparked the Arab Spring. I investigate how narrative is related to reality, or how reality is shaped

by the narratives with which governments, media outlets and citizens understand and interpret what is going on around them.

In the first section, I look at the national and international discourses that provide the context for the events of December 2010 and January 2011. A brief history of Tunisia since independence from France focuses on a national narrative and discourse managed by the government. In addition I compare this discourse and the story it told Tunisians about themselves and the social and economic realities that Tunisians experienced. The increasingly disturbing gap between the story and the facts may go some way to explaining how the Ben Ali regime's story lost its grip on the Tunisian imagination.

National, international and regional, discourses affected the story of the Tunisian revolution. After the collapse of the Soviet block in the late 1980s and early 1990s, during the largely peaceful transitions from communist to democratic capitalist governments in Eastern Europe, a wave of theories about the possibilities of non-violent revolution became popular with political and academic figures hoping for a more democratic world. People both inside and outside Tunisia hoped that these theories would translate to real victories as protest brought down the regime without widespread bloodshed.

Another international discourse that Tunisia appeared to exemplify was that of the Arab Youth Bulge. One of the gaps between the Ben Ali regime's story and reality was the belief in education as a means of eradicating poverty. When politicians, international NGOs and the media discuss the youth bulge, they refer to a generation that is educated beyond their countries' ability to provide jobs for them. Great instability and, possibly, profound changes will be wrought by the enormous number of young people whose skills

far outweigh their opportunities. This was the dominant discourse, and during the revolution it seemed to be the truth.

What role do new media – personal blogs and social networking sites –play in shaping these discourses? Unlike government run newspapers and television stations, new media are supposed to give everyone a voice. The prevalent discourse in this forum is that anything is possible and the internet is a space in which a truly free public sphere can thrive. Michel Foucault would say, however, that no matter how free the space, the discourse is still dictated by those in power. Foucault asserted that discourse could be so strong a tool that, "in every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, orgranized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers." (1981, p.52) Because of the hegemonic power of national governments and international political and economic structures, oppositional discourse continues to work within the frame created by the original discourse. I question which of these views is closest to the truth.

Next, I examine the story of Mohammed Bouazizi and see how it fits into this context. Which discourses does it disrupt and which does it support? Who were the people telling this story and to whom were they telling it? I also explore how social media was used in creating the story and what effect that had on how it was told and who was hearing it.

Once the story had begun to spark protests throughout Tunisia, the international press picked up on it. How and from whom they heard it made an impact on how it was received and transmitted to the rest of the world. I divide this into the two regions of the world that I believe had the most impact on the Arab Spring. First I will look at how the

story was received by the West. Large western news corporations have high penetration worldwide and, therefore, their version of the story is an important aspect of media coverage as a whole. They also influence and are influenced by western governments, which are likely to have the power to change the course of political and military events in countries dependent on them for aid and trade.

Also important, however, is the reaction of regional Arab media and publics. Without regional media, it could have been merely a Tunisian Spring rather than an Arab one. I briefly discuss the extraordinary phenomenon of copycat self-immolators and idolization of Mohammed Bouazizi in the larger Arab world. His face became famous on posters and his name in graffiti across the region. His story resonated strongly with narratives well beyond Tunisia. Many of these countries suffered from similar afflictions, such as histories of authoritarian governments and youthful populations with high unemployment. I ask how that affects the popularity of his story.

Then I will turn from the content of the story to the means of its spread. Because of the official Tunisian media's silence during the early days of the revolution, enormous credit for the spread of the story goes to individual social media users. I explore how this shaped the story and how it interacts with the international, then finally, national media. When the Tunisian government shut down the internet, the revolution did not stop; the move only heightened people's anger and pushed more out into the streets.

There have been widespread debates over the impact of social media on the course of the Arab revolutions. Is it truly a Facebook or Twitter revolution, or do these labels only serve to negate the agency of Tunisians and other Arabs and give the credit to western technology? The role of media, new and old, in the Tunisian revolution is

complex, and I do not have space here to fully cover each of these topics, but I will attend to them briefly because they shine light on my main questions about narrative, discourse and the revolutionary events in Tunisia.

Finally, I examine the truth and untruth of Mohammed Bouazizi's story that emerged after the height of the revolutionary furor began to die down. The effect of the falsity of the story on the revolutionaries was somewhat counterintuitive. Many Tunisians who supported the revolution felt that the exact truth of the story for the individual was less important than the abstract truth for the whole. As time passes and Tunisia continues to face difficulties-such as continued economic hardship, the challenge of building democratic institutions and systems and the herculean task of incorporating opposing groups into a coherent national polity willing to negotiate and compromise with each other-some have even found it appropriate to debunk the Bouazizi myth and its connection to the revolution, and point out the connection between a man and a revolution who may not be all they appeared at first to be. (Hajlaoui, 2012)

In my conclusion, I explore the Bouazizi story's position at the intersection of national and international discourse, national narrative and personal story. How do these all affect each other and how is power played out by this intersection. As Tunisians took over and replaced the story of the Ben Ali regime with their own stories, they broke his absolute power to the national narrative. Both old and new media played a large role in this process, but is that media powerful in itself, or is it simply instrumental?

There are several words with overlapping usages and meanings that I employ in the course of this thesis; I define them for the sake of clarity. Story, narrative and discourse are linked, but not identical. I use them differently with specific definitions and

varying levels of abstractness. A story refers to a particular construct told about certain people at a certain time and place, such as the story of Mohammed Bouazizi, and is fairly simple to understand. A narrative, which can also be called a narrative structure, refers to a pattern or template, which multiple personal stories can follow (Linde, 2001), such as the narrative of a masculine presence (the French General Consul, Bourguiba, Ben Ali) in an authoritarian role over a feminine entity (the Tunisian people) because he knows what is best for her. A discourse, or discursive field, refers to a larger set of assumptions and beliefs that make up the context in which stories and narratives are formed (Foucault, 2010). The main discourses discussed in this thesis are that of a peaceful democratic revolution and that of an Arab youth bulge. Although these terms overlap I will attempt to use them all as outlined here.

Media and Collective Narrative

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson brilliantly theorized the formation of cohesive nation-states through the imaginary communities shaped by print media. He argued that the spread of printed material allowed a shared public sphere to arise among people reading the same language by engendering a simultaneous concept of time. People could now connect happenings from one town to another in newspapers, and imagine the same characters and places in a novel, creating shared symbols (1983). Today we live in a world of vastly expanded media experiences, from news packaged by major, multinational media conglomerates to individuals contributing to the public opinion and knowledge base through blogs and social media postings. This broad media

map allows us to expand on the ideas posited by Anderson and look at the contested imaginaries that can form and change communities.

Counterintuitively, this expansion of media and its disconnection from nation-states has not in fact left us looking for another formation. Although it may change in the future, at present ideas, movements, and revolutions created by narratives launched in this imaginary space continue to focus on the nation-state. And although these media are global, they are used primarily for national ends. So Anderson's theory remains as relevant for today's Tunisia as it was for nineteenth century Indonesia.

Although his theories are less rooted in the notion of the nation-state, Arjun Appadurai shows us in his book, *Modernity at Large*, how globalization does not defeat the local, but enhances and is enhanced by it (Appadurai, 1996). He argues that globalization can actually promote ideas of local identity. Expanding media also provides new platforms and an increased audience for the spread of national myths and narratives. Television reaches more people than print media ever did, even in highly literate societies. This creates a space for collective imagination that can shape a new consciousness based in the history and culture of a locality or nation.

The collective identity created by media, along with education, government policies and economic systems, influence not only our sense of belonging, but also our vision of national politics and society. Yesim Arat shows how cultural context informs politics in her study of women participating in the Turkish Islamist movement as volunteers. Her conclusion was that Turkish Islamism took on a very particular aspect that reflected the specific history and narrative of previous Turkish politics and education.

She believes that the Turkish government's use of the language of democracy (even at times when that government was far from democratic) and the highly regulated form of Islam taught in schools created a distinct type of Islamist movement, one that embraced democratic forms and specifically Turkish interpretations of Islam. This insight provokes a question about the narrative of the Tunisian revolution: how did the history of Tunisian national discourse and national narrative shape the opposition narrative? And how did the story of Mohammed Bouazizi fit into that narrative (Arat, 2005)?

In trying to understand how these national narratives become such an integral part of individual stories, I look to Charlotte Linde's article, "The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story," which explores the ways in which people use common narrative structures to build stories of their own lives. In her study of the corporate culture in an insurance agency, employees told the story of how they came to be in their position in a way that closely echoed the story of the beginning of the corporation. Because of the repetition of this story all around them, they came to see their own lives as having been shaped in similar ways. This creates group cohesiveness and helps promote common goals and achievements. (Linde, 2001)

In her book, *Life Stories*, Linde discusses the related phenomenon of how people feel the need to create coherence within their life stories. Although a life can be told in a series of any number of stories with any number of themes running through it, people tend to choose a particular vision of their life and choose and tell stories with that vision in mind. The audience for a story also influences the life story within which it is set. For cohesiveness to work for both speaker and listener, these stories must be in line with certain larger cultural ideas and histories. (Linde, 1993) I argue that the story told about

Mohammed Bouazizi had this kind of cohesiveness for Tunisians and this is why it resonated so deeply.

Even when holes were revealed in Bouazizi's story, and people began to question its veracity, he remained a galvanizing symbol for many revolutionaries throughout the Arab world. In her article, "It Was Like a Fever…" Francesca Polletta discusses a similar, seemingly misleading narrative used among American civil rights activists. Although they were all aware that it was an inaccurate depiction of the genesis of their actions, the activists found the spontaneous feeling of phrases like "it was like a fever" resonated with their feeling of inspiration. This idea of unplanned and unorganized protest was what was contagious, although the actions themselves were very well planned and coordinated (Polletta, 1998). In this sense, it was the story constructed from parts (sometimes untrue) of Mohammed Bouazizi's life, which fit into a larger recognizable narrative, rather than his actual life story that was the inspiration for millions of protestors.

The narratives that existed in the Tunisian public sphere had a very gendered quality. Beth Baron explored the feminization of the figure of the nation in her book, *Egypt as a Woman*. She examines women's role in the nationalist movement in Egypt in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, arguing that Egypt's common depiction as a woman in iconography allowed male nationalist figures to present themselves as her savior. Women who participated in the nationalist movement tended to be portrayed as mothers of the nation, relegating them to the home even in the context of rousing political rhetoric (Baron, 2005). I will tell a similar story about Tunisia, yet one that emphasizes narrative over visual imagery.

In an article that examines decolonization talks at the United Nations in 1960, Vrushali Patil discusses the gendered discourse of colonialism. He argues that colonial powers feminized colonized peoples as a part of their paternalistic role. Because they denied the masculinity of colonized men through this discourse, independence movements and new nationalist groups often used the language of reclaiming masculinity in their efforts to take back their nations. (Patil, 2009) If the masculine role was then coopted by victorious nationalist leaders like Bourguiba who led the new nations, the people became feminized once more when those leaders continued the paternalistic policies of the colonizers.

But where and how are these narratives formed? Because corporate and government sponsored media dominate a large portion of the public narrative space, it can be difficult for non-official stories to attain a footing. The Tunisian government has long maintained a stranglehold on media sources in the country, but new media have changed all that and created, little by little, chances for ordinary voices to reemerge. Has this given rise to a new opportunity for a public sphere?

Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere was largely based on European history. Through this lens he traced the "representational" culture of feudal times, then the public sphere of early democracy - when all citizens could participate in public debate in venues like coffeehouses - then the fall of the public sphere with the rise of mass media. (Habermas, 1991) The mass media took citizens voices by drowning them out with their vast resources, but does this remain entirely true? Although mass media still plays an enormous role in both domestic and international politics, the internet has begun to open up spaces for greater participation. Could this be emerging as the new public

sphere? In an attempt to answer this question, I examine the interaction of individual, national and corporate media and their influences on narratives and events in the Tunisian revolution.

Studying this sphere, Richard Augustus Norton examined the effect that new media can have on the public through the shooting of Mohammed al-Durra. The power of the images caught on video by France 2, a French television station, shocked the world and provoked protests in most Arab nations. The footage shows 12-year old Mohammed al-Durra and his father crouched next to a concrete wall trying to protect themselves from the incessant gun-fire coming from Israeli soldiers off screen. The soldiers were shooting at "rioting" Palestinian youths armed with stones that they were throwing at the soldiers, but Mohammed and his father were clearly not involved in the conflict. Both of them were shot, Mohammed fatally, along with two ambulance drivers who were trying to rescue them. Ministries of Information in most Arab countries are loath to show such provocative footage for fear of political unrest, but the imagery was widespread online and on major Arab satellite networks. As the numbers of people connected to alternative news sources through satellite and internet increase, governments' ability to control what their citizens are exposed to decreases dramatically. Narratives that conflict with governments' versions of events are available to a greater number of people than ever before (Norton 2003).

Even the way that professional media is made can make a difference in the story being told. Amahl Bishara reveals some interesting facts about the creation of stories on the Middle East for Western media in her book, *Back Stories*. She looks at local participation in the production of international media through translation, interviews of

locals who are inaccessible to international journalists, and the collection of facts and stories that seem interesting to Palestinians. Although her focus is on the special aspects of western reporting on Palestinian issues, she lays bare the process of news collection common to many foreign correspondents. Although the foreign journalists have the byline and foreign editors have the final say on the content and slant of stories, local influence can creep in and many choices are made on the ground. (Bishara, 2013) How did stringers, fixers and translators in the professional media world and amateur social media users influence the story of Mohammed Bouazizi and the Tunisian revolution as it was told to the rest of the world? While Tunisian media was prevented from reporting on these events, perhaps echoes of their voices were still being heard in news reports and papers across the world.

The nature of the relationship between media and the uprisings in the Middle East has been hotly contested. Some observers see social media as the catalyst for the uprisings, while others claim that they had little effect, or were simply the contemporary communication technologies available to the protesters and could have been substituted by others. Miriyam Aouragh and Anne Alexander interviewed activists in Cairo to try to understand the real relationship. They found that, unsurprisingly, neither extreme theory seemed accurate. Media were used widely and were important sources of information for activists and others, but the characterization of the uprising as a "Facebook" revolution or a "Twitter" revolution was far overstating the case. The real revolution took shape through the actions of citizens on the streets, and giving undue weight to technology threatens to obscure the very real sacrifices made and risks taken by Egyptian citizens (Aouragh and Alexander 2011).

Section 1: Historical Context

Michel Foucault describes discursive fields as the set of rules, or beliefs that shape a particular type of discursive object. A discursive object might be, in his example, a pathology that has been created by the discursive field of psychopathology. (Foucault, 2010) The story of Mohammed Bouazizi could be seen as a discursive object created within the discursive field of Tunisian national narratives intersected by the international democratization and development, and the Arab youth bulge discursive fields. In this section I look more closely at these three discursive fields that made up a significant portion of the background to our narrative.

The Tunisian national narrative was linked to common narratives across many newly independent countries following the collapse of the European empires. After independence, Bourguiba created a story about the country and his relationship to it that--although altered over the years--set the stage for a masculinist narrative to take hold of the public imagination. This narrative told Tunisians their position in society, what they were and what they would become. But cracks emerged in this national imagining, forcing people to notice the divergence between the narrative and reality, allowing alternative narratives to come to the fore. Even the alternatives, however, followed many of the basic patterns established by the official story.

After Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956, Habib Bourguiba became its first president. Despite some political infighting and jockeying for position, Bourguiba, who had negotiated independence from France, quickly secured his control over the country and the government. The story he told of the new nation-state of Tunisia was inextricably interwoven with his own story, and he came to represent the state itself.

He named streets and avenues after himself, erected statues of himself and required shopkeepers to post his pictures in their stores. Of Bourguiba's self-identification with the state, Willis wrote:

> In his regular public speeches to the population he associated his own personal life history with that of Tunisia and its people as a whole. He sought to convey the impression that he was Tunisia itself. He famously responded to a journalist who asked about the Tunisian 'system' by exclaiming: 'The system? What system? I am the system!' (Willis, 2010, p. 51)

Despite these overbearing authoritarian moves, Tunisians largely supported his presidency for many years. (Perkins, 2004)

One theory, from the "cultural difference" school of thought, is that the idea of the presidency Tunisians held may have something to do with the complacency of the population in the face of the singular power Bourguiba held over the state. John O. Voll argues in "Sultans, Saints and Presidents" that part of the reason Americans have a difficult time understanding the idea of an all powerful president or a president for life, as Bourguiba eventually dubbed himself, is because of a linguistic and cultural divide. Voll looks at the terminology used for rulers in North Africa, and the discourses those terms are embedded in within Islamic history and culture, and uses these ideas to analyze politics in the region today. (Voll, 1997)

The term that is used in Tunisia (and thoughout the Arab world) and translated into English as president is "rais." This word is not in fact a direct translation of the word "president" in English, with all of its connotations of popular representation and

democratic elections. Instead, it means leader or head, quite literally coming from the word for head of the body, so there is no contradiction in Arabic in the term president for life. Voll argues that this could have contributed to Bourguiba, as president, having a discursive space for the type of omnipotent leadership role he assumed.

However, discourses that justify authoritarian government also tend to be backed up by force or the credible threat of force, which I believe goes much further to explain authoritarian governments longevity. As was shown through the Tunisians' chants of "Ben Ali, degage!" (Ben Ali, clear out!), Voll's assertion that Tunisians understand the "Rais" only as a leader or head, with no other connotations is a very narrow interpretation. They are also aware of, and influenced by, the national narrative of a savior/caretaker, and international narratives surrounding democracy and leadership. Tunisians are quite politically and socially aware, and knowledgeable about world affairs, able to understand the divergence between pure language and political and social reality, so although it is an interesting linguistic point, a difference in etymology does not entirely explain a difference in reception. This and other "cultural difference" arguments tend to break down under scrutiny and with the passage of time, and yet they must be addressed as they continue to arise.

Habib Bourguiba had definite plans for how to use the reigns of power he had skillfully gathered in his hands. He saw himself as the only man able to shape the modern, western-looking Tunisia of the future, and worked tirelessly to make his vision a reality. Perhaps it was his use of power towards a political goal rather than for his own material enrichment that sustained his popularity for so long, and quelled dissent against his authoritarianism. He told the story of a modern nation-state emerging from the darkness

of colonialism and surpassing all other Arab states. He focused much of his effort and dialogue on women's issues and education. Early in his 30-year reign there was not a large gap between this story and reality. Bourguiba did enact far-ranging reforms of family law, giving women more rights than anywhere else in the Arab world. He also increased access to education for vast numbers of his citizens and made primary school compulsory. Thousands of schools were built, teachers were trained, and Tunisians became one of the most highly educated peoples in the Arab world.

After Bourguiba had ruled for 30 years, Ben Ali, an advisor from a military background, led a bloodless coup against him and assumed the presidency in 1987. Ben Ali was one of the only military men to hold political office in Tunisia unlike many Arab states, in which military rulers are the norm. Despite Ben Ali having a military background, the Tunisian military was not a political force in the country, which had important repercussions for the trajectory and outcome of the revolution. Although he decried the personality cult that Bourguiba had built up around himself and his identification with the state, Ben Ali in his campaign to tear down Bourguiba statues and rename Bourguiba streets and avenues, simply replaced them with ubiquitous references to November 7, 1987, the day he came to power. He also reformed some of Bourguiba's political ideas, primarily by embracing more neo-liberal, free-market economic policies, but stayed on message with rhetoric of modernization, progress, secularism. Thus, Ben Ali's regime continued the narrative theme of identification of the state of Tunisia with a man, in this case Ben Ali, whose life embodied the history of that state, and who would protect and control the nation by fulfilling the promise of modernization. Both of these

themes are important to remember when thinking about the narrative tradition in which Mohammed Bouazizi's was embedded.

The second influential discursive field in relation to the Mohammed Bouazizi story is the international development and political discourse surrounding the idea of the Arab Youth Bulge. During the 1990s and 2000s, academics, international political analysts and development specialists became aware of and increasingly interested in the fact that the Arab world, like sub-Saharan Africa, had an unusually young population, a large percentage of the people being under 25 (or 24, 27, 29, depending on which agency's statistics one looks at). The fact that this is true is not particularly debatable, if one accepts national censuses and the like as relatively accurate. There are various theories about why this is happening, usually involving a combination of economic and health and sanitation factors. Most important for this study, are the implications of the "youth bulge" for the states affected.

There have been many different predictions, in academia, policy circles and the media, on the implications of this demographic bump on economic and political reality; most predictors have pointed to some aspect of the Arab spring to evince their prescience. Generally, most espouse the negative view that unemployment will cause youth unrest, while a few believe this new generation, educated and technologically savvy, will be a powerful force for positive change in the region. In a sense, these are two different perspectives on the same phenomenon. Those who are primarily concerned with keeping the region "stable" and quiet are unhappy about the idea of a generation of educated youth who are discontented with the lack of political and economic opportunities available to them and able to express these feelings. However, those who are hoping for

change see the empowerment through numbers of a group that can help bring about democracy and economic progress.

Anthropologists and sociologists also studied youth culture in the Arab world because they believed that it was important. In 2010 Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera edited a book entitled *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North.* It was a collection of chapters written by scholars who were studying youth across the Muslim world, with several of the chapters focusing on Arab countries. In the introduction the editors note, "the cultural behavior of Muslim youths can be understood as located in the political realm and representing a new arena of contestation for power." It is this discourse of youth power that makes the youth bulge idea so important to the Mohammed Bouazizi story.

International development specialists were also fascinated by this demographic phenomenon. In 2009 the UN published the *Arab Human Development Report: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries,* a document that discussed many issues facing the Arab world, but emphasized the youth bulge and youth unemployment as a crucial issue, one that affected the entire region. They also convened three youth congresses across the region because they claimed that there was public desire for this particular demographic to have their say. Then they named the year beginning in August 2010 and running through the following July "International Year of Youth," and issued a special report on the state of youth in the Arab world.

Most of these reports expressed concern that this youth bulge coincided with an era of increased access to education and little opportunity for employment. The youth bulge was not simply an issue of large numbers in a particular generation, but in a

generation that is educated and prepared for opportunities that have failed to materialize. Over the past few decades most Arab governments have liberalized their economies and cut back on the number of government jobs, just as record numbers of degree holding potential workers attempted to enter the job market. Because the private sector has not grown large and robust enough to pick up the slack, unemployment numbers have soared. In addition to the unemployed are underemployed, including those with college and graduate degrees who are unhappy working in menial jobs for low wages.

The fact that this phenomenon was of such interest to so many different groups meant that it was taken up in mass media and public discourse. The youth bulge became a commonly acknowledged social fact, which allowed youth to understand themselves as part of a group who had similar problems that were often seen as resulting from bad government policies. They watched as governments cut large numbers of the public sector jobs they had hoped to obtain after completing their education. The lack of jobs led to young people being stuck and frustrated, unable to move into the next stage of their lives, to get married and move out of their parents' houses. (Herrera, 2010) Because of these circumstances, the international community, media and national governments saw this group as a stewing pot waiting to boil over.

The third discursive field that had a major effect on the reception of Bouazizi's story is the discourse of peaceful democratic revolution that began with the break up of the USSR and the Eastern European Socialist block. This discourse was present in Tunisia, but was particularly important in relation to how the western media and audiences reacted to the story of Mohammed Bouazizi and its effects on the Tunisian population.

Since the beginning of the French Revolution in 1787, the West has looked at democratic revolutions as necessarily violent. Although the Western Powers professed to support democracy and self-determination everywhere, practical considerations focused on maintaining security and stability have often led the US and other western governments to oppose democratic movements. the fall of the Soviet block beginning in 1989, and the largely peaceful revolutions that transformed the European portion of that territory, led many western observers to believe in the possibility of revolution without bloodshed and with results that coincided with their own interests , as these newly independent nations opened economically and began embracing Western political institutions.

In 1991, Robert H. Dix wrote an article in the Journal *Polity* challenging political scientists and other scholars to entirely rethink revolutionary theory because of the nature of the Eastern European revolutions. He argues that up until that point violence was part of the definition of revolution, but the lack of bloodshed in the Eastern European cases should change this perception. (Dix, 1991)

Likewise, the media took up the idea of non-violent revolution. For example, the British newspaper *The Independent* published an opinion piece in 1996 claiming that the way we look at revolution had changed in the previous decade and it had been proven that peaceful revolutions were not only possible but becoming routine. The tone of the article was triumphant and encouraged support of such revolutions wherever they might occur. (Barber, 1996) This view was commonly held during the 1990s, and optimism was the predominant sentiment among many pro-democracy activists.

Although optimism over the possibility of a peaceful future faded somewhat with time, there were still those who believed and it continues to influence activists and some governments, scholars and journalists. The prospect of a non-violent revolution may have encouraged Tunisians to go into the streets feeling like they had a chance of being unharmed. From the point of view of western governments, it was easier to support the protesters when they were not wielding weapons and threatening catastrophic destabilization across the region.

Section 2: The Feminization of Tunisia

Another aspect of Tunisia's national narratives is the feminization of Tunisia and her people. I will look back as far as the colonial era to observe the feminizing rhetoric behind authoritarian governance, and the brief masculinizing moments of rebellion such as Bouazizi's self-immolation. Throughout the last 150 years, those holding political control have claimed that they are working for the benefit of a nation that doesn't know what is good for it and is unable to manage its own affairs. This classic feminizing narrative disempowers people by telling them authoritarian governance is for their own good.

I shall begin by looking at the end of Tunisia's Ottoman period, when control from Istanbul was distant and ineffective. The Bey in Tunis, who answered only nominally to Istanbul, had control over Tunis and a few other cities and coastal areas. The internal areas were independent domains under tribal control, with only a loose connection to the government. During this period, France was consolidating its control over the neighboring territory of Algeria, which became a major French settler colony

with a highly militaristic and effective colonial government. Although the French had citizens and economic interests in Tunisia, they had no formal control before 1881.

Claiming rights to military intervention because of attacks, which came from tribal groups across the border from Tunisia into Algeria, France invaded in 1881. The Bey was forced to sign an agreement with the French relinquishing control of military and foreign affairs in return for retaining limited power in the face of the overwhelming French military force. Over the next few years the French continued to take control of different aspects of the government, including using Tunisia's debts to justify French control over its banking and economic sectors. As the new colonial administration grew, more French citizens moved in, expanding the European courts and shifting private property into European hands.

The language used in each stage of the colonial appropriation of Tunisia's military, political and economic spheres was paternalistic and feminizing. The official French narrative was that the Tunisians were backward and could not manage their own country; they needed the guiding hand of a resident general to aid the ineffectual Bey in ruling his people. French language and culture was considered superior to Arabic, and many upper and middle class Tunisians sent their children to French language schools; a few of the very wealthy sent them to France. Although extreme right-wing *colons* (European colonial settlers), who were generally racist and wanted to preserve the strict hierarchical division between Tunisians and Europeans, believed that Tunisians should be taught only farming in order to enrich their European employers, more "progressive" French believed that Tunisians could become equal to the French if they learned the French language and studied and embraced French philosophy and values. The only way

for a Tunisian to claim his place in the masculine world of work or to have any power was to emulate the French. To embrace only Tunisian, Arab or Islamic culture was to be disempowered and voiceless, feminized.

The path to independence was paved in paternalistic and Eurocentric stones. After World War II, despite their greatly weakened empire, the French still refused to give up their colonies, including Tunisia. In the early 1950s, however, they began to see the writing on the wall and slowly withdrew from Tunisia, in part because they needed the extra resources for the struggle to keep their most prized possession, Algeria. At first they allowed Tunisians some political power over domestic issues. The *colons* were outraged at what they saw as the diminishment of their own power, but the nationalist movement that had been growing in Tunisia for some time didn't want to settle for anything less that full independence. When it arrived, in 1956, power was handed over to the neo-Dustour group led by Habib Bourguiba. The French had felt more comfortable dealing with him than with some of his compatriots because of his western education and pro-European outlook. Independence began with maintaining strong ties to the metropole.

For a brief moment, Tunisians were empowered once again with the departure of the French. Independence struggles and other revolutionary forces have often been described as reclaiming masculinity from the feminization imposed on them by colonial or authoritarian governments. Patil's study of the masculine discourse used in UN discussions by nationalist groups seeking to throw off colonial power was published in 1960, the during the independence era and early years of post-colonial government in Tunisia. Many nationalist leaders of the day had studied together in the metropoles, or met while in exile for their anti-colonial stances. Therefore, the discourses their politics

were embedded in were reinforced not only by being enmeshed in colonial discourses, but by the cross-pollination between colonies. Bourguiba was one of these exiles, spending some years in Cairo near the end of the colonial period where he interacted with independence activists from across the Middle East and North Africa.

As described above, Tunisia won independence from France in 1956, and Habib Bouguiba became its first president. There were other independence activists attempting to take over leadership of the newly formed nation, but the fact that Bourguiba had been the one to negotiate the independence agreement with France gave him an advantage. He presented himself as the masculine hero who rescued Tunisia from colonialism's grip. The official story of Tunisia's independence became the story of inextricably intertwined Bourguiba. Tunisia did not have the power to exist without Bourguiba, as he was their caretaker. Therefore, Bourguiba's story followed the narrative that had been used by the French colonial government, simply replacing the French with himself.

In the last years of his presidency, Bourguiba became paranoid, firing and sometimes imprisoning many of his advisors and political supporters. His attacks on others in his circle were feared to spread; he was now a threat rather than a savior. So Ben Ali took power in a bloodless coup 1987, becoming the hero who saved the Tunisian state from ruin. The absolute control that Bourguiba had built up for himself passed into Ben Ali's hands. Thus, once again the regime maintained the discursive theme of a masculine presence saving a feminine nation and echoed Bourguiba's identification of the state of Tunisia with a man whose life embodied the history of that state, protecting and controlling the nation through fulfilling the promise of modernization.

These stories Tunisia's leaders told fit into a narrative similar to that which Baron described in her book, *Egypt as a Woman*. Leaders of many newly independent nations adopted the same patriarchal dichotomy. When nations and peoples are feminized, then the same narrative of used by colonial regimes is adopted by the new independent governments. The nation, the feminine figure, is painted as helpless and in need of rescuing and directing. The leader is that masculine figure, able to take the lead and do what is best for the nation. Although some post-colonial policies were successful, the people remained disempowered.

Over the twenty-five years of Ben Ali's regime, we see the same paternalistic, feminizing policies. Even when he claimed reform and allowed elections, each time a move was made to empower people, Ben Ali found a justification for rescinding that power. There was more and more unrest. As discussed above, governmental handling of the economy was leaving large segments of the population unemployed or underemployed. Many men felt disempowered because they were not able to provide for their families, or even afford to get married. In an analysis of polls taken in Tunisia in 2009 and 2010, Gallop asserted, "Tunisians' perceptions soured on well being/life evaluation, employment, satisfaction with basic infrastructure, and the perception that businesses can succeed." This was despite the fact that the country's economy was improving as a whole, according to standard economic indicators. Much of the discontent felt by Tunisians during this time may be attributed to the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, as well as a common feeling that corruption made it impossible for lower or middle class families to get ahead. This intensifies Tunisians' sense   of

helplessness. (Gallup) It was time for the nation to reassert its masculinity and revolt. Then came the story of Mohammed Bouazizi.

Section 3: The Story of Mohammed Bouazizi

The story told about Mohammed Bouazizi represented many problems with Ben Ali's Tunisia. He was a young graduate unable to find a job worthy of his degree, was forced to sell fruit from a cart to earn only a small amount of money and work without a permit, like many other sellers. The policewoman who came to harass him for selling fruit without a permit slapped him, laughed at him, then took some of his fruit as she left. This was a perfect illustration of the demasculinization of Tunisia, leaving an ordinary man disempowered and humiliated. When he went to the municipal government to make a complaint, he was turned away with no action taken and without even a hearing of his grievances. That was when he set himself ablaze in front of the government building.

His cohorts from the unofficial fruit and vegetable market began to protest his treatment the next day. Frustrated students and graduates joined Bouazizi's friends and family in the protests. Attempting to stop the demonstrations in their tracks, the government used its control over the media to keep all mention of the event or subsequent protests out of the news. Yet protesters were able to circumvent this roadblock by using social media. The first news from Sidi Bouzid that reached the outside was video footage from people's cell phones uploaded to YouTube. As the videos went viral in Tunisia, Mohammed Bouazizi's story spread, and a nation no longer willing to accept collective disempowerment took to the streets to join the rebellion.

I would like to think about how this story was formulated and spread in the first few days of protests. Social media had an interesting part to play in both circumventing government attempts at censorship and empowering the Tunisian people, allowing the story to be more a product of collective narrative and consciousness than a triumph of truth in media. The first hint of the story outside Sidi Bouzid was a collection of videos posted by people who got their information about Mohammed Bouazizi from rumors running around about a group of people at the protests, most of whom did not know him personally, and were not present at the event in question. As can be demonstrated with a simple game of telephone, any thoughts passed from person to person are bound to change, and people will inevitably hear what they believe should be said or remember inaccurately or incompletely, and pass that to the next person. So we should think about how this story fits in with the dominant discourses present in Tunisia at the time.

The common description of Bouazizi as a young graduate without an appropriate job echoes the Arab Youth bulge discourse, particularly in Tunisia, with its large numbers of highly educated youth. The country was perfectly suited to the development of a strong generational consciousness among the youth, as well as a perception of this generation as special among Tunisian society more widely.

Mannheim, the classic theorist of generations, believed that in order for a generational consciousness to form, certain preconditions must be fulfilled. First, people of about the same age group must have a shared background and experience a major break from the past, through trauma or a technological breakthrough, at a relatively young age. They must also be in a position to share their reactions in a way that forms a feeling of group solidarity (though, there can be multiple responses from different

subgroups called units). These preconditions, then, must solidify into a new way of approaching the world from that of past generations.

Other scholars have worked to test, argue with, or improve upon this theory, but Mannheim's main idea has changed little in the last sixty years. Molly Andrews has attempted to add to Mannheim's theory of generational consciousness by examining how exactly people create this group feeling. She argues that it is both formed and expressed through narrative. When people tell their stories and histories, they locate themselves in a generation. Vertically, narratives connect a person to their culture, and proceeding and succeeding generations. Horizontally, narratives link people to their generations. These stories help people recognize their connectedness and create more stories that in turn foster a generational bond.

The narratives present in Tunisia's national discourse on education, the education system itself, and the international discourse on the Arab Youth Bulge all led to a strong generational consciousness among educated, underemployed Tunisian youth. This consciousness was ready to be activated by Mohammed Bouazizi's story and the events surrounding his self-immolation. As soon as people began to hear about a young man in a low paid job humiliated by the state, the rest of the story might have written itself.

Another important aspect of this story, which I will discuss in more detail later, is the large youth presence on social media. Tunisia was the most connected of the Arab countries at the beginning of the Arab Spring. Although exact numbers are not available for most media in the region, there were more homes connected to the internet per capita than any other Arab country, and there were hundreds, if not thousands, of thriving

internet cafes where those with fewer resources could access and contribute to online content.

Not only did many Tunisians have access to the internet, but when we look at the spread of the story and the protests it becomes obvious that they were active users of the medium. Multiple people filmed the first protest in Sidi Bouzid with their phones and uploaded footage to social media sites. One particular video went viral on YouTube, showing the widespread use of and familiarity with this media. Protests erupted all over the country in no time, with activists using social media to spread the news about which official news outlets kept silent. With access to social media and much time on their hands, unemployed and underemployed young Tunisians became adept at using media to their advantage, a skill that was to work for them during the revolution.

The story of Mohammed Bouazizi also speaks to the desire of the Tunisian people to reclaim their masculinity after years of feminization. Although the exact events were later questioned, the image of a young underemployed youth being slapped by a policewoman and his helplessness in the face of the insult tapped into a deep-rooted disgust with the disempowerment shared by all Tunisians. Fighting back is a masculine move; Bouazizi's self-immolation and the subsequent protests were a strong backlash against decades of feminization at the hands of the state. The policewoman was a perfect character for this narrative.

Section 4: The Story Spreads

What made Mohammed Bouazizi's story more effective than other similar, stories before it? After all, he was the second man to light himself on fire in Tunisia that year, and many others had expressed their frustration with the state in various ways. Mohammed self-immolated on the morning of December 17 and his family and friends started a peaceful march later that day. They came armed with cellphones. They knew that no one was paying attention to the problems of a poor town in central Tunisia, far from the tourists and wealth of the coast. So a couple of Mohammed's cousins took video footage of the march, posted it on YouTube and circulated it on Facebook. The next day, they continued to take footage as protests grew more aggressive and the police became violent. Now they had people's attention.

Fortunately for the protestors, not only did many Tunisians see the footage, but Al Jazeera picked up on the story right away. The station employs technologically savvy journalists to troll video and social media sites for interesting footage and stories that they are not getting through official channels. The night after Mohammed Bouazizi's shocking act, Al Jazeera's Mubashar channel aired a video of police coming down on protesters in Sidi Bouzid, and suddenly the world knew something was going on. A couple of days later, on December 20, 2010, France 24 posted a story about the growing protests that were already spreading throughout Tunisia despite the government's media blackout.

The Tunisian media knew it had to respond, so they reported a sad, isolated incident that had occurred on December 17 when Mohammed Bouazizi lit himself on fire. They were not yet allowed to discuss the protests, and people continued to see no news on Tunisian television about the events going on in the streets and on social media. Even

Tunisians who do not have access to internet usually have access to satellite TV, so the government's attempts to silence the story failed, as it spread through major pan-Arab and French satellite networks - Al Jazeera, then France 24, then Al Arabiyya.

The first stories published and told were the same version that journalists heard from protestors and bloggers in Tunisia. They followed the retaking masculinity narrative of the independence movement and fit that in with international discourses about the Arab Youth Bulge and democratization through peaceful protest. As demonstrations grew, the media began taking more notice. The media began to use (or overuse) the phrase "the spark that lit the flame" to describe Mohammed Bouazizi. This description continued throughout winter and spring, as protests spread across the Arab world. Their depiction of events was true in some ways, but also misleading. Although Mohammed's self-immolation certainly kicked things off, most protests had little to do with him or his personal issues with the government.

However, the veracity of the story was not immediately questioned; it was largely taken for granted as news of the protests spread. As the first pictures of protests reached the news, governments, journalists and the public in the West seemed unsure of how to react. Even private individuals are sometimes anxious about security issues that could arise without strong stable leadership in place, particularly in the Arab world.

The French, in particular, had long seen Tunisia as a triumph, a perfect blend of Arab culture with French modernity. It was considered one of the safest, richest, best educated countries in the Arab world, one with which France maintained heavy trade ties. For many French citizens it was a favorite vacation destination and they contributed a

significant percentage of Tunisia's hard currency. To see this outbreak of unrest on the streets was surprising if not shocking to many.

In the United States, on the other hand, most people knew very little about Tunisia. As the story broke, they learned where it was on a map and a little about the corrupt ruler Ben Ali from the nightly news. Most Americans did not hear about the protests until after even the official Tunisian media had given up its radio silence on December 29, 2010. In the following weeks they would learn more about the small North African nation than they ever thought possible.

Reporters began to get excited as the Ben Ali government made concessions to the protesters. It looked like a moment of profound capitulation in a region famous for its autocratic dictators. As they began to compare the protests to successful non-violent revolutions in Eastern Europe in the early nineties, viewers were allowed to experience the excitement, too. The American government, however, had a harder time making up its mind about how it should approach these events. Officially they took no side, and encouraged everyone to find a peaceful solution to their problems. As Tunisian police shot protesters and online activists were jailed, European governments (except for France) began to come out in favor of the protesters, but the Obama administration remained cautious. Finally, a few days before Ben Ali left the country, the U.S. called for free and fair elections, though they did not explicitly call for Ben Ali to step down.

As people around the Arab world watched the Tunisian revolution on television every night and followed events moment by moment on Twitter and Facebook, they also watched the reactions of world leaders. Egypt was the next to start protesting, then Libya, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen followed suit. The fall of the Ben Ali government was

inspiring, as power seemed to be in the hands of the people in the streets, encouraged by the overwhelming international support of the newly leaderless country from media and major international figures.

The story of Mohammed Bouazizi was told and retold across the Arab world for months as revolution fever grew and spread. The discourses that were circulating in Tunisia that resonated so deeply with the people were similar to those in other countries in the region. The Arab youth bulge was region wide, and the discourse of peaceful democratic revolution had global impact.

But this story spread more than protest. Many young men self-immolated in emulation of Bouazizi, perhaps hoping to shock the world into changing, the way he had done. According to Mosaique FM, a privately owned radio station in Tunisia, there were 2 self-immolations in 2010, then 91 in 2011 and 63 in 2012. The number drops to 11 in 2013. This arc points to dozens of young men finding personal inspiration in the story of Bouazizi's bold action in Tunisia alone. Self-immolations began to pop up in countries across the Arab world and the Tunisian revolution was not only generally applauded, but graffiti and posters of Mohammed Bouazizi's face and name were ubiquitous in the region.

Section 5: Media and the Tunisian Revolution

Tunisia's government has always kept a strong grip on the media, using it to fit events into the narrative that supports them best. Mohammed Bouazizi's act of self-immolation and the ensuing protests were not reported in the official Tunisian press until President Ben Ali visited Bouazizi in the hospital in a desperate attempt to placate protesters. In part, the story of the revolution is the story of a government that lost control of the national narrative because of changes in media technology. The internet allowed many Tunisians access to alternative coverage of events, often through social media, and even more saw the information collected from those media on international news channels beamed into their homes through satellite dishes. The government had no way of controlling media that anybody could contribute to using their camera phones or twitter. The government shutdown of the internet shows that they were aware of the power of these tools, although the move was ineffective in quelling unrest.

As with the story of Mohammed al-Durra, Mohammed Bouazizi's story and its effects are largely due to people's access to alternative media sources (Norton, 2003). Norton emphasized satellite television, which continues to be a widespread influence in the region and constitutes a large portion of the news people watch in Tunisia as elsewhere. Khalil Rinnawi, in his book *Instant Nationalism: McArabism, Al-Jazeera, and Transnational Media in the Arab World,* examines the spread of satellite television. His numbers show that there was an official penetration rate of over 20% in 2001. He also says that the real rate is much higher because of groups of people getting together to run cables and share a single satellite dish between as many as 100 people. (Rinnawi, 2006,

22-25) Anecdotal evidence to this effect is not conclusive, but has been noted by media scholars in almost every country in the region.

Although Rinnawi's argument is about the rise of a pan-Arabism based on shared media access, another important outcome of widespread satellite coverage is that most Arabs, including Tunisians, are regularly exposed to news sources that are not regulated by their government. Traditionally, Tunisia has had fairly strict press laws and both government and independent media have followed the official line as far as what gets covered. This was brought home in the days following Bouazizi's self-immolation and the rising protests when local media showed no signs of being aware of the problems. This must have seemed increasingly absurd to a population that was watching videos spread on Facebook and picked up by the satellite news sources they watched every night.

Al Jazeera was the best situated to pick up on the story early with its teams of researchers patrolling social media sites to find stories not being reported by official media outlets. They found and broadcast some of the first videos of protests in Sidi Bouzid, so that despite the Ben Ali regime's efforts, there was no media blackout for most people. Soon, the government realized that a news media blackout was not possible, so they shut down video sharing sites and bloggers in Tunisia. This stopped many Tunisians from being able to express themselves, but did not stop the story.

Facebook, however, was not shut down, so activists continued to share videos through Facebook pages, creating networks throughout Tunisia and beyond. But the regime fought fire with fire, creating codes that would record people's login information on Facebook and other social networking sites. They used their passwords to hack into activists' pages and delete anti-regime content and sometimes, whole pages and accounts.

Ben Ali supporters claimed that the codes were meant to protect people's accounts from outside hacking, but after the revolution, the truth became apparent. Not only were they hacking into activists' accounts and deleting information, but they were also able to identify and arrest many online activists.

The presence of activists online made it easier for foreign journalists to report the story. They were following events on Tunisians' Facebook pages and emailing back and forth for on the ground, up to the minute news. In her book, *Back Stories,* Amahl Bishara looks at the Palestinians on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza who help create the news stories with bylines crediting only western journalists living in Israel. (Bishara, 2013) In the same way that the Palestinians Bishara studied were able to choose which facts were transmitted to western journalists, the Tunisian activists who had a presence online were able to set the terms and create the story. They were savvy enough to know that video footage and stories and rhetoric that fit with international discourses would earn them press coverage and support.

These activists became heroes of the revolution in the eyes of Tunisians and the international media. Their work, on and offline, created the impetus and organization for protests, and a link to show the world what was happening. It was through their actions that they gained international support and inspired uprisings in other countries across the region and the world. Later, when Mohammed Bouazizi's cousins spoke to reporters, they said they recorded and uploaded videos of the first protests in Sidi Bouzid because they knew the videos would be the only way to make the world pay attention. Enough people followed their lead to topple a government.

But was it the citizens protesting that had this effect, or the media that allowed it to be viewed by millions? The nature of the relationship between media and the uprisings in the Middle East has been hotly contested. I would like to return to Aouragh and Alexander's assertion, with which I agree, that although social media were instrumental, they were not causal (Aouragh and Alexander 2011). Every generation has different resources at its disposal and those resources, when employed well, can have a profound effect upon outcomes, but they do not create revolutions.

In western media, the portrayal of the events in the Middle East and North Africa as technology-driven revolutions had the effect of taking credit away from the people working for change on the ground. On the other hand, there is no denying that media played a role in the revolutions as both a catalyst and a tool. In Tunisia, as in Egypt, greater access to information doubtless contributed to discontent and social media helped activists to inform and organize themselves and others. These facts, though, should not lead us to believe that it was western technology that produced revolution. There were journalists and activists working tirelessly to provide information and undermine misleading state run media. Once that information had become widely available, activists were able to use social media to turn citizen unhappiness into action. Satellite television and the internet are excellent tools for both stages in the process, but it was the people using the tools who created the revolution. And if the activists had limited themselves to online protest, the revolution would not have happened. Millions of Tunisians risking their lives to take to the streets was the only action that could have caused Ben Ali to step down from power.

Section 6: The story revealed

The story of Mohammed Bouazizi inspired many and continued circulating as a major part of the narrative of struggle that Tunisians were engaged in. Although there were many grievances and more martyrs, Bouazizi was the first and his image still drew praise. On January 14, 2011, Ben Ali fled the country and his regime fell leading to rejoicing in the streets. Now the real work would begin. Journalists began to follow up the story of Mohammed Bouazizi as the protests died down and the nation building had not yet begun. They found that the story was not exactly what had been portrayed up until this point. When interviewed, many people who knew him in Sidi Bouzid said that they would not discuss the false information in the story during the revolution because they did not want to derail it. The cause of ridding the country of Ben Ali and his regime was more important than the truth or lack thereof of the story of Mohammed Bouazizi.

When it began to be uncovered, journalists interviewing Tunisians about the story found a number of people who were bitter about the fabrications. A simple example is the fact that he had been falsely portrayed as a graduate. It was widely accepted that this rumor had such staying power because of the well-known fact of youth unemployment. The penetration of the Arab youth bulge discourse, and its emphasis on young people with higher degrees who cannot find suitable employment, meant that no one questioned this simple fact of whether or not Bouazizi was a graduate. This was a fabrication that did not hurt anyone, so it is often dismissed as unimportant.

More disturbing is how the story of the policewoman's slap played out. When Bouazizi self-immolated, the police force carried out an investigation of the incident and found Fedia Hamdi, the policewoman in question, innocent of the slap. Under normal

circumstances, that would have been the end of the issue and Hamdi would have continued working as usual, but this was during a revolutionary moment and the powers that be needed a scapegoat. After Hamdi had been acquitted, authorities turned around and arrested her at the request of the government. Until he fled, Ben Ali continued to look for ways to reclaim the country from the protestors, and this was one of them. About the same time he visited the burned Bouazizi in the hospital and handed his mother and stepfather a check in compensation, he had Hamdi imprisoned.

Unfortunately, her ordeal did not end with the fall of the Ben Ali regime. Ben Ali fled on January 14, 2011, but she remained in prison until April 19. When the case was reexamined in the court of public opinion, growing numbers of people supported her as facts emerged. It was clear that there had been a confrontation because Mohammed Bouazizi had his fruit stall set up in an illegal location. Many people regularly broke this law because of the difficulty of getting permits for legal sales, but as a policewoman she had a legitimate right to speak to reprehend him. The only witness who claimed to have seen her strike Bouazizi (Bouazizi himself had been unconscious in the hospital since his self-immolation) had a personal grudge against her. Several other witnesses said that there had been no physical abuse. This revelation does not mean that Bouazizi didn't have legitimate reasons for his frustrations, but it takes some of the shine off his heroic image when people believe that a woman was wrongfully imprisoned for claims made on his behalf.

There were also hard feelings about Mohammed's mother making money from his story and leaving her humble community for an apartment in a seaside suburb of Tunis. Family and friends believed that she had grown haughty because of the money and

international attention surrounding the story of her son. As these stories spread through Tunisia, then made the papers in the West, the ideal martyr began to topple from his pedestal. Yet the story is not completely washed away from collective memory. While some Tunisians quickly dropped his name from their discussions of the revolution, others simply deployed the narrative differently. His name still appears on lists of the martyrs and his image is still used in connection with the revolution. An article posted on *Nawaat*, a Tunisian website, called "The Second Anniversary of the Outbreak of the Revolution: To Celebrate or Not to Celebrate…That is the Question," featured a graphic of a map of Sidi Bouzid with a drawing of Bouazizi's face superimposed on top of it. He now represented not only the glory and bravery of the revolution, but also some of its more questionable aspects. He became a perfect representative of the author's view of the revolution because of the faults in his narrative rather than despite them (Hajlaoui 2012).

Conclusion

Mohammed Bouazizi's story became famous and admired, then debunked and desecrated, then simply assimilated as part of the larger story of the revolution. Although several specific pieces of his story turned out to be false or questionable, the larger truths in the context of a shared experience of the Ben Ali regime were sound. The fabrications in Bouazizi's story are possibly a better reflection of the social reality of the revolution than the truth.

Rather than a perfectly true story, the one we believed and that started a revolution was created at the intersection of national narratives and international discourse. The story of a young man who reminded people of young men they knew, of

themselves, frustrated, struggling to get by, was situated in a larger frame of national narratives. These national narratives about a feminized people and a masculine act that can empower them were a perfect template for a bold move, like self-immolation. This was a new version of the narrative, though, set in a world shaped by discourses about the potential and/or danger of a large population of Arab youth who are overeducated and underemployed. It was the right story for the right place at the right time and its literal truth was ultimately irrelevant to the revolution.

Bouazizi's story is a prime example of how media can facilitate social and political transformation. Aside from the debate over how much of an influence new media forms had on the Arab Spring, they clearly have an enormous influence over how we think about it. New forms of media were the tools used to shape the narrative that began with the actions of a young man in Sidi Bouzid, but this narrative also reminds us of the importance of concrete acts committed by individual Tunisians to the success of the revolution. New media was able to disrupt the hegemonic national narrative and replace it with a slightly different, if related one, paralleling a revolution, just as it disrupted and replaced the Tunisian government.

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