

Social Media Sites As A Means Of Pressure And A New Factory To Shape Public Opinion In Tunisia

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Abstract

The formation of public opinion has always been associated with the media, but with the new technological changes taking place in the world, social networks have become a new and influential actor in shaping public opinion among individuals. With its many characteristics, social media played an important role in the process of disseminating information and interacting with it, also it gave the public the opportunity to play the role of the actor in shaping public opinion. This article examined the role of social networks in Tunisia, particularly Facebook, in making Tunisian public opinion and public engagement with it, as these sites became a platform for Tunisians to express their views and aspirations, as well as a way to pressure and impose their decisions on power and political forces.

Keywords: Social media, public opinion, the formation of public opinion, means of pressure, Virtual Mobilisation

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Introduction

Since the early '80s, the world has been experiencing an unprecedented technological revolution that has dramatically changed the world of media and communication technology. Many studies pointed out the importance of social networks in the communication between the society members, as many believe that social networks are now controlling all uses and gratifications of a large group of people, especially young people. With the advent of new media and techniques, many politicians and youth have been able to exploit it and use it in the political movement and public opinion industry, which could be seen too clear during the last ten years in the world as general and the Arab world in particular.

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in December 2010, social media played a central role in the outbreak of the revolution in Tunisia, passing through the rest of the revolutions, the thing that made the politicians and media professionals noted the ability of social networks to make a public opinion and its importance in decision making, as users or “peoples” at all levels also recognized the ability of social networks to communicate public opinion and make change.

This unlimited and accelerated spread of social networks contributed greatly to the direction and control of the decisions taken. The new digital environment in its various platforms has also contributed to changing the way in which content is produced and distributed, which

in turn contributed to changing visions about the issues raised and current events, besides, it allowed all parties to transfer alternative narratives that may be within legitimate or even illegal values. The role of social media platforms has shifted from being mere platforms for communication and publishing various media contents, which in turn have been something new in recent years. To become today a factory of public opinion, as allowed the active users to be able to use the new media to change views and the future of countries according to new concepts and visions.

The Tunisian people took the lead in using social media for political and social purposes since the revolution of January 14, 2011, until the last presidential elections in October 2019. The new media in Tunisia has played a significant role in dramatically changing political and social conditions, as it entered the line by supplying the people with possible information without the need censor of the "Gatekeeper". Thus, the information rights were transferred to the people easily after they were secretly surrounded in the cellars of traditional television and media organizations and in various sensitive departments and ministries, as the Tunisian media was subject to the authority of the state and under its control (the external communication agency was directly subordinate to Ben Ali).

The paradox of Kais Saied's victory in Tunisia's presidency at the expense of well-known political figures supported by major parties that own logistical means (financial and media support), in addition to the

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electronic campaigns carried out by the Tunisian people on various occasions to express their opinion. This prompted to ask about the ability of Social media networks and their role in the political, cultural and social changes accompanying the social movement in Tunisia, wondering about their role in shaping public opinion, and about the ability of these new technologies that imposed themselves in front of traditional media.

The phenomenon that Tunisia witnessed recently has a great impact on making the most important political and electoral decisions of the Tunisian people, therefore, the main question posed is: How have social networks become a pressure authority and a new factory to form public opinion in Tunisia?

The concept of social media and its evolution

- **The concept of social media**

The new media has authorized the emergence of a new communication system in the world in general, and in the Arab world in particular. The new media represents a new aspect, not only within the framework of the semantics of communication sciences but with the concepts surrounding this new type of media. Where the concept of new media is related to the development that occurred in the communication networks, as this development is associated with an increase in the ability to benefit from the web as a communication network.

Users have become easily able to modify and add to the published content, as many tools and applications that allow news and information to circulate and share with great ease also appeared along with the possibility of re-publishing them across different contexts, forming a new system of social relations that was launched by social networks. These new methods provided their users with a set of features that simulate reality, where dialogues, publications, videos and photos can be shared in an open manner without regard to geographical boundaries, open universe dialogues; create virtual communities that allow its user to choose friends, groups, and pages that they want to be active within. At the same time, it expresses belonging, which strengthens the identity bond between the owners of the one struggle and common goals.

Social media is a term refers to sites that have been linked to the development occurred in communication networks, specifically the development of the web from the first generation to the second generation or web 2.0.¹ As it allows communication between its users in a virtual community environment that brings them together according to their interests or affiliations (country, school, hobby ... etc.). All this is done through direct communication services such as sending messages or viewing the personal files of others to know their

¹ Badreddine Belmoulay Kassadi, The role of new media in socialization and political practice, "دور الإعلام الجديد في التنشئة والممارسة السياسية", Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, n29, June 2017.

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news and information they make it available for viewing and participation.

Preece and Maloney Krichmar define social networking sites as "a place where people meet for specific goals and are guided by policies that include a number of rules and standards proposed by the program".² According to Boyd and Ellison, social networking sites are online services that allow individuals to build a public figure or Semi-public through a specific system.

Through the previous definitions, social networking sites can be defined as "a group of sites that allow individuals to communicate in a virtual society in which they can introduce themselves and exchange their interests, where individuals through these sites able publish a number of topics, pictures, videos and other activities they may receive comments about it from other users who belong to these networks and have common links".³

- **The evolution of social media**

The true story of social media begins in the 1970s with the emergence of the Internet. The first two social media platforms were "Six Degrees"

² Wasinee Kittiwongvivat, Pimonpha Rakkannan, Facebooking your dream, Master Thesis, 2010, p20.

³ Amy Y. Chou, David C. Chou, Information System Characteristics and Social Network Software, 2009, p336.

and "Friendster", which no longer exist, although they have been instrumental in launching what has become a social media revolution. "Six Degrees" is considered the first social networks because it allows users to register with their email address, create individual profiles and add friends to their personal network, where it was officially launched in 1997 and lasted until 2001, the number of its users peaked at about 3.5 million.

A few years later, in 2002, the "Friendster" site appeared to compete with "Six Degrees". It allowed users to register with their email address, to make friends and to register them as part of a personal network. Users could also share videos, photos, and messages with other users. In addition to that, they were able to leave comments on other people's profiles, as long as they were part of everyone's personal network. A few months after its launch, "Friendster" had more than three million users and this number has continued to grow to over one hundred million. However, "MySpace" was the most popular and influential at the level of early social networking sites; it launched on August 1, 2003, and has quickly become the world's largest social media site, connecting millions of active users around the world.⁴ In the early days, it was a file storage platform, but it soon became an online social network, which contributed to its meteoric rise.

⁴ Keith Terrell, *The Complete History of Social Media: From the First Online Network to Today*, June 16, 2015.

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The sites rolled after, but the highlight was the appearance of FaceBook.com, which founded, like many other social networking sites, by university students who initially peddled their product to other university students. It launched in 2004 as a Harvard-only exercise and remained a campus-oriented site for two full years before finally opening to the public in 2006. After its launch and subsequent expansion, Facebook grew quickly, surpassing “MySpace” in 2008 as the most visited site in the world, where nowadays it ranks the third on the Alexa traffic rankings, behind only Google and YouTube.⁵

The emergence of Twitter in the world of microblogging has also made a difference, where the term of microblogging used as a tool to post contributions similar to that of a blog, but in a format limited to 140 characters. Twitter was created on March 21, 2006, by Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams, where today it has around 330 million monthly active users.⁶

The number of social networks has varied and diversified, but the most important and most used ones are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Pinterest. According to the statistics of 2019, there are more than 3 billion social media users, the number increasing every

⁵ Joshua Hardwick, Top 100 Most Visited Websites by Search Traffic (as of 2019). <https://ahrefs.com/blog/most-visited-websites/> Accessed November 24, 2019.

⁶ Ying Lin, 10 Twitter Statistics Every Marketer Should Know in 2019. <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/twitter-statistics> Accessed November 24, 2019.

year,⁷ where there are 11 new people using social networks for the first time every second.⁸ These sites have occurred a great revolution on the level of freedom of publication, expression, consolidation of democratic thought and support for peoples in self-determination, based on their ease of use, their rapid spread and with minimal material costs.

Social networks and their development on the Tunisian scene

- **A historical context for Facebook in Tunisia**

Social media has enjoyed an important place among the Tunisian people since the start of the revolution and until today as a result of its important and central role in the democratic change of the country. The Tunisian people opened up to social media after a media drought that lasted for years in the era of Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

In the beginning, it should be noted that Tunisia is one of the developed countries in the use of technology within the countries of North Africa, also it is the first Arab country to activate the Internet, where the internet

⁷ Dave Chaffey, Global social media research summary 2019, Smart Insights.

<https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/> Accessed November 24, 2019.

⁸ Christine Warner, 10 Social Media Usage Statistics You Should Know (and What They Mean for Your Marketing Strategy), 2018.

<https://www.skyword.com/contentstandard/> Accessed November 24, 2019.

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activated for the first time in Tunisia in 1991.⁹ The Internet penetration rate reached 24% in Tunisia in 2009, against 7.4% in Egypt and 12% in Morocco. In 2011, one-third of Tunisians used the Internet.¹⁰

Ben Ali* regime worked to take advantage of the development in the field of communications to improve its image in the country. Nevertheless, the Ben Ali regime tightened its grip on all sites where censorship was tight for all users. This censorship included bloggers and opponents who criticized Ben Ali's policies and even the regular use of the Internet. The Ben Ali regime has used censorship and blocking with sophisticated means to disrupt access to opposition websites, as it monitored and intercepted the emails. The Internet police took on the task of hiding and blocking files linked to e-mail via the electronic sensor, which Tunisians sarcastically called "Ammar 404".**

⁹ Aamna Dhillon, *Social Media & Revolution: The Importance of the Internet in Tunisia's Uprising*, SIT Study Abroad, 2014.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Ghannam, *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011*, Center for International Media Assistance, February 3, 2011.

* Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was a Tunisian politician and President of Tunisia from 1987 until his fall in 2011. At the beginning of 2011, a popular protest movement, inaugurating the beginning of the Arab Spring, forced him to leave the country and following a month flees to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. After several trials in absentia, the total sentences passed against him exceed 200 years in prison; He died on September 19, 2019.

** Ammar 404. A word game about the 404 error displayed instead of blocked websites.

The regime has recruited its devices to follow up on internet users by setting up a special device in informatics to monitor and track, and has imposed many laws on telecom companies, such as requiring them to provide the "Tunisian Internet Agency" with the list of their users. In addition to that, the regime has been used to disconnect the internet for a number of civil societies on several occasions. Monitoring and blocking campaigns targeted all political opponents, independent associations, unions, and even diplomatic missions. The regime has blocked several sites such as "YouTube", "Dailymotion, the Facebook site in 2008, electronic newspapers and opposition party websites, and many personal blogs, including human rights sites.

Despite the repression of freedoms and the trials that were conducted by security services, human rights defenders have used the internet to break the censorship of the public sphere and break the silence surrounding the abuses committed by the repression and tyranny. The internet space was a parallel space of activities and expressions, as it was a refuge for the opposition and free voices for exercising citizenship and expressing their convictions. Social network sites in Tunisia were linked to freedom and regime resistance in the memory of many Tunisians, who knew the meaning of freedom and media freedom only after the 2011 revolution.

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- **Social media in Tunisia in numbers**

The report published by the data reportal website,¹¹ on January 31, 2019, titled digital Tunisia 2019, revealed the Tunisian relationship with the internet and social networks. According to the report, 7.9 million Tunisians use the internet, which means about 67% of the 11.72 million inhabitants. The report noted that the number of Tunisians subscribing to smartphones reached 17.55 million (150% of the population), as and social media users via mobile phones, 6.6 million (59% of the population). The report pointed out that the number of Tunisians active on social media increased by 300,000 between January 2018 and January 2019.

Facebook ranked first in the ranking of the most used social networking sites in Tunisia, followed by Instagram, then LinkedIn, Snapchat, then Twitter, in order. The number of active Facebook users is 7.40 million, 55% of them are males, compared by 1.9 million for Instagram users, 50% are females. While there are 193.5 thousand users for Twitter, 75% of them are males.¹²

Today, the information and communications technology infrastructure in Tunisia consider stronger than before, as Tunisia has partial internet freedom compared to what it was during the tyranny before 2011.

¹¹ datareportal.com

¹² digital Tunisia 2019,p 14 – 33.

<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-tunisia> Accessed November 25, 2019.

According to the Freedom House rankings in the Internet Freedom Index,* Tunisia is considered partially free, as it obtained 64 points out of 100 in 2019,** which advanced two points from the 2018 report,¹³ where the 100 points are divided according to three axes: Obstacles to Access, Limits on Content, Violations of User Rights. In comparison to some other Arab countries, such as Egypt (26 points), Saudi Arabia (25 points) and Morocco (54 points),¹⁴ Tunisia is slowly moving forward to consolidate the meanings of freedom in various fields.

In the term of obstacles to access rights, Tunisia has obtained 16 points out of 25 in information and communications technology infrastructure and its quality, while it has obtained 29 out of 35 points in setting limitations and censorship over the published content. Although some contents have been removed from time to time, the organization stated in its report that the process is largely transparent without any

* Freedom House is an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom around the world. <https://freedomhouse.org/>

** There are three stages of freedom status on the Internet according to "Freedom House": Between 0-39 points, not free. Between 40 -69 points, partially free. Between 70 - 100 points, free.

¹³ <https://www.freedomonthenet.org/country/tunisia/freedom-on-the-net/2019#C>
Accessed November 25, 2019.

¹⁴ <https://www.freedomonthenet.org/countries-in-detail> Accessed November 26, 2019.

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censorship and there are no blocking content cases because of politically motivated.

While in the term of violations of human rights, Tunisia has obtained 19 points out of 40. As the organization considers that the legal framework of the country poses a threat to the freedom of the internet, especially after a number of bloggers have been arrested recently in the absence of a clear legal framework governing the monitoring and sanctioning process.¹⁵

- **Social media and its role in the outbreak the revolution in Tunisia**

Bloggers in Tunisia lived in a cold electronic war with the Ben Ali regime, where Ben Ali's authority excels in the beginning through complete censorship and strict restrictions on all opponents and bloggers. These practices prompted a number of them to go out on many occasions to denounce and demand their right in expression and publication, but these protests were met with arrest and torture, which led to a state of anger and congestion among young people, which strengthened the concept of the rebellion against the regime.

Before 17 December 2010, Tunisia was fertile ground for rebellion against the Ben Ali regime because of corruption, unemployment, marginalization and restrictions on civil liberties. When "Bouazizi" burned himself in the city of "Sidi Bouzid" on 17 December 2010, to

¹⁵ Ibid.

protest against the mistreatment of a police officer, the Ben Ali regime launched a fierce crackdown against citizens who went out to disapproval the incident and marginalization their city.

This repressive movement was an opportunity to provide users on social media with a terrible media material documenting violation, where it contributed in turn to spreading the "Bouazizi" incident despite the discreetly of the authorities and traditional media channels that were under the control of the authority. Therefore, bloggers and internet users have created on Facebook groups in addition to lists and news channels on Twitter with fake names in an attempt to maintain the continuity of reporting the news.

Young people also used social media to organize their movements and communicate with each other when protests invaded the rest of the Tunisian cities. When the country entered a state of chaos and random violence after the escape of Ben Ali, people used social media to organize themselves, form protection teams to revive their neighbourhoods from the supporters of the former regime and thieves, and to prevent the spread of destabilizing rumours, the thing that helped to control the situation at that time.

Although the use of social media in 2011 was not that intense, it played an important role in reaching a rapid consensus among protesters, ensuring the continuity of protests, attracting the attention of protesters to urgent demands, and reducing submission and drifting behind false

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news published by local channels that supported the authority. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube also played important roles in documenting and publishing the revolution's news, besides they were a source of information for foreign channels that used what was posted on personal accounts for users of these sites, while local channels continued to discreetly and falsified news and following the policy of simplifying events.

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A- The concept of public opinion and the Ways of its formation

- **The concept of public opinion**

The public opinion considered as a modern term that emerged in the late 18th century after the American Independence War and the French Revolution. It has been recognized by prominent political theorists as varied as, Rousseau, Tocqueville, Bentham, Lord Acton, Bryce, and others.¹⁶

The ancient civilizations also knew concepts similar to public opinion, where Greeks knew the concepts close to the idea of public opinions such as general agreement or trends. The Romans also talked about the common views among the people, where they reached the concept of

¹⁶ Vincent Price, History Philosophy of Public Opinion and Public Opinion Research, 2007, p12.

the voice of the public or the voice of the people at the end of their empire, perhaps it is very close to the term public opinion in modern history.

In the middle ages, it can be seen that both the Islamic and Christian worlds have recognized the importance of public opinion. Where Muslim caliphs have given great importance to know the conditions of people and public opinion in society through the concept of Shura, while the Christian world used the term general agreement or consensus based on the sophisticated concept of the idea of public or collective feeling. The phenomenon was circulating but in different terms such as the will of the nation, the will of the people, the collective conscience, the public spirit ... etc.¹⁷

Public opinion, a collection of individual points of view, attitudes and beliefs about a particular subject, expressed by a significant proportion of the community. Some scholars consider the aggregate as a synthesis of the views of the whole or a certain segment of society; others see it as a collection of many differing or opposing points of view. Writing in 1918, the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley emphasized public opinion as a process of interaction and mutual influence rather than a state of broad agreement.¹⁸

¹⁷ Dr. Burhan Zureik, Public opinion, (الرأي العام), book series published after the departure, first edition, 2016, p6.

¹⁸ W. Phillips Davison, Public opinion, Encyclopedia Britannica.

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The American political scientist "V.O. Key" defined public opinion in 1961 as "opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed"¹⁹, as William Albigh adds that the issue should be of interest to the group as a result of their interaction and discussion.²⁰ Thus, it can be concluded that public opinion is the general consensus of the people "or a particular social group" on a particular matter, problem or incident, and it is what the community or the mainstream want after interaction and discussion. The influence of public opinion is not restricted to politics and elections. It is a powerful force in many other spheres, such as culture, fashion, literature and the arts, consumer spending, and marketing and public relations.

Nowadays, public opinion has increased in importance as a result of the public policy's needs for support and cooperate with a large number of people, whether in times of war or peace, which need the support of public opinion to achieve many internal and external policies. The spread of democracy and the expansion of voting are among the reasons that gave importance to the concept of public opinion. The development of mass communication has also doubled the importance of public opinion, as a result of the tremendous technological development that has taken place, leading to the convergence of public opinion trends in

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-opinion#accordion-article-history>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lectures on Communication and Public Opinion, University of Algeria, 2015.

various countries, which allowed what happens anywhere resonates immediately everywhere.

The development of mass communication means facilitated the process of communicating news and reactions to it, thus increasing the ability of the means of communication in shaping people's opinions, adapting their attitudes and mobilizing the ranks. People may use different types of behaviours to express their public opinions such as revolutions when the public is convinced that there is no point in expressing their opinion by speaking, or by demonstrations where people express some rebellion and try to tell governments about their views on a problem, in addition to the means of public meetings and seminars.

Today, social media is one of the most important means of expressing public opinion, as it considers a suitable place to provide the public with information and opportunities for discussion and interaction, therefore a fertile arena for the public opinion industry. Public opinion is playing an essential role in determining the nature of the system and in shaping ideas and politics, and by this, it has become an effective factor in the directions of political thought and in making political decisions, whether at the local, regional or international levels.

- **Ways formation of public opinion**

Many factors overlap to form or make public opinion, such as firstly the societal factors that including freedom and democracy, methods of

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communication adopted in society, media and propaganda, pressure groups and parties, intellectual and ideological heritage, as well as external factors, or international and regional. Secondly, personal factors such as the individual's educational, cultural and economic level, and the method of socialization. It is difficult to understand public opinion in a nation without taking into account those material and social forces that shape the personality of the nation and contribute to the formation of individual beliefs and trends.²¹

One of the conditions for the formation of public opinion is the emergence of a public controversy issue that concerns the public, where it is discussed within the dialogue in different ways and then the view of the majority is adopted. In turn, the expression of public opinion exerts influence and pressure either on the behaviour of individuals and groups or on the public policy of the state or decision-makers to reach harmony or consensus to the greatest part possible.

According to Clyde Hing, there are four stages in the formation of public opinion, the first stage in the dissatisfaction of the group with one issue, he believed that the problem can be remedied by the group "Group Action". In the second phase, discontent prevails among all the masses, as well as awareness and the general need for treatment and

²¹ Abdul Karim Ali Jaber Al-Dubaisi, Public Opinion, Formation and Measurement Methods, "الرأي العام عوامل تكوينه وطرق قياسه", Dar Al-Masira for Printing and Publishing, Edition 2, p127.

action. The third stage is characterized by the formulation of issues, based on discussion and presentation of views, the third stage is characterized by the elaboration of issues, through discussion and presentation of views, which are usually take place in the media, while the last stage is governance and decision-making.²²

Therefore, the formation of public opinion is an idea, issue or project adopted by leaders of opinion or a particular group that deliberates the idea in all available means and works to share it with the attempt to gain new supporters in order to increase its spread with full readiness to respond to any suspicions or counter-ideas. Of course, not all people will develop a certain position on a general issue; some may not be interested, others simply may not hear about it.

- **Public opinion and social media**

There is no difference in the close relationship between public opinion and the media, the more the media cares about the formulation of the message and gives it more time, the greater its influence on public opinion. Through various means of mass communication, it is possible to influence public opinion. It is the greatest way to reach the masses wherever they are and to convey and circulate ideas.

²² Abdul-Razzaq Al-Dulaimi, Publicity, Rumors, and Public Opinion: A Contemporary Vision, "الدعاية والشائعات والرأي العام: رؤية معاصرة", Al-Yazouri Scientific House for Publishing and Distribution, p224.

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Political conditions are often complex and difficult to follow, requiring citizens to be informed about politics and events, therefore, it was necessary to rely on fast communication channels that have the ability to penetrate throughout the country. The chances of the media to influence the formation of public opinion is very great, through an exchange relationship between them,

The media cares about the most important stages of forming public opinion, which is the stage of introducing the issue to the people as TV or radio programs, political statements, prepared reports, and guest reception is a crucial part of the crystallization of public opinion. The media gives the political and intellectual elites of society enormous potential to influence citizens' attitudes, his free dissemination of information through means of communication creates great potential for popular action based on a broad and accurate knowledge of events.²³ The impact on the audience depends on the quality of the media message, that makes him able to turn a static or undeclared issue into a public opinion issue by highlighting and giving extra attention to it.

The media have the ability to highlight certain issues and ignore others, where they put forward what they deem appropriate to the public according to their thought and media agenda. It also plays another

²³ Dr. Yasser Abdel-Tawab, Elements Influencing the Formation of Public Opinion, "العناصر المؤثرة في تشكيل الرأي العام," Egyptian Institute for Studies, 2019.

<https://eipss-eg.org>

important role in allowing individuals to know what others think and also gives political leaders large audiences. In this way, the media allows the public to include large numbers of individuals and large geographical areas. The media influence politics in two closely related ways, the first is based on the influence of the media on public opinion, which in turn affects decision-makers, while the second on influencing decision-makers, providing information, ideas and images to form an integrated image.

As for the social networks, which have become the necessity imposed by the rapid changes in the world of mass communication, the idea of forming public opinion has benefited greatly from the new media and social media. The free dissemination of information through social media has created great potential for popular action based on a broad and accurate knowledge of political events, thereby influencing the citizen's perception of politics.

These networks take a unique position in this process, exerting strong influences on decision-makers and in shaping public opinion, the process of including new and interactive opinion leaders on a wide and varied level with the speed of circulation of news from many followers contributed centrally in making these networks become a new kitchen to form public opinion. This has made it a link between public opinion and decision-makers.

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New media have reduced the control of governments and influential agendas in shaping public opinion issues, it also increased its concerns and caution towards this spread. The advantage of real-time interaction with what is published by social media, unlike traditional audiovisual media, enabled the public to react quickly and express public opinion.

Digital communication and media have become a necessity of life, as it serves as a link between all components of social construction, it is also responsible for explaining and presenting what each social institution has to others. In addition to that, the media also play a very important and dangerous role in shaping public opinion by mobilizing groups around specific ideas, opinions and attitudes, regardless of geographic divergence and heterogeneity. Tremendous technological advances have increased the ability of digital media to achieve an advanced level of influence and orientation towards particular opinions and ideas. But each mean has a number of advantages that make it different in terms of impact from other means. Because the frequency of exposure to the media increases the power of their influence in shaping the trends of public opinion, digital social networking was characterized by the power of impact because it brought together all the advantages of traditional means of communication in the message that provided to the public.

Referring to what the social media provided after the so-called Arab Spring revolutions, we can say that the concept of leaders and influencers has undergone some modifications and changes. Social

networking sites have allowed everyone using these networks to become the influencers and decision-makers from their site. The issues on the ground became no longer the prerogative of traditional opinion leaders. As well as the opinion leadership is no longer confined to prominent public figures, where some active citizens on social media have become stars and leaders of public opinion in their respective fields, including those who specialize or care for public affairs that fall within the scope of political public opinion. The journalist also became no longer the first to do the dating function, but internet users are the first to do so.

This gave all ideas and facts a new outlet that does not require reception in a television channel or writing an article in the newspaper or a permit to hold a public seminar. This explains the formation of other government fronts parallel to face the same idea of popular media in communication and new media to create a balance between them and the popular electronic fronts and personal developing in this area, making it the subject of independent research in this issue.

The free dissemination of information through social media, as well as its enrichment by all, contributed to the creation of great potential for popular youth movement based on a broad and accurate knowledge of political and social events, which in turn influenced decision-makers and in shaping public opinion.

B- Social media is a partner in shaping public opinion

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- **Electronic campaigns as a means of pressure on the authority**

After the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime in 2011, Tunisia began a process of democratic transition in which citizens enjoyed unprecedented political rights and civil liberties. The new media has also moved from a simple media alternative that allows people to express their views and orientations to a means of organization and political participation in order to regain rights and resist attempts to circumvent and protect the revolution.

Campaigns on social media began with the sit-in "Kasbah One", which started after coordination between young men from the town of "Menzel Bouzayen" on Facebook. Where they decided to start a march to Tunis under the slogan "Freedom Caravan" to overthrow Ben Ali's government and form a Constituent Assembly, the movement began with 2,500 people that became a public demand in all states later.²⁴

Passing through the 2013 departure sit-in, which marked a milestone in the change of the Tunisian political track, which toppled the first government (Troika) elected after the revolution, the sit-in was

²⁴ Bashir Al-Hamedi, Tunisia, in order not to forget and to have a memory, Civilized Dialogue, No 5057, 2016.

Accessed _____ November 25, 2019, from <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=502499>.

mobilized through social networking pages that contributed to conveying the demands and developments of the sit-in continuously.

In addition to the campaign "I will not forgive", which spontaneously launched on Facebook pages in September 2015 and spread in the rest of the social media through the hashtag "#will-not-forgive" as an expression of rejection of the reconciliation law. This law gives immunity to businessmen and political officials from the era of Ben Ali and Protects them from prosecution on suspicion of financial corruption. A team of young people managed to establish a Facebook page²⁵ through which they invited other people to demonstrate. The page contains the movements in all the states, it also discusses and identifies priorities and future plans for the movements that lasted for nearly two years, which resulted to drop two-thirds of the project and ratify the reconciliation law in the administrative field only on 13 September 2017.²⁶ This move was similar to the spontaneous and non-partisan revolution that social media played an important role in mobilizing and changing the decision.

The campaign "I will not forgive" was not the only online campaign that turned into public pressure on the authorities and translated into marches and demonstrations. In 2005, the "Where Oil" campaign was

²⁵ <https://fr-fr.facebook.com/manichmsame7/> Accessed November 25, 2019.

²⁶ Tunisie : la loi sur la réconciliation nationale votée ,BBC : <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-41276440>.

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launched in which social media users demanded the state to provide real figures about the country's oil wealth. In addition to "Fesh Nestanew" campaign that means "What are we waiting for"* and "taalam oum"***a campaign that means "Learn to Swim". All campaigns started from social sites, which imposed the authority and the parties concerned to answer and provide clear explanations, thus moving these topics from the virtual framework to the realistic framework and become the talk of the street and the media as a whole.

The youth took social networking sites as a platform for them to express their political decisions and opinions and decide on several political and social positions that were important in the country. The online campaigns also touched on issues related to foreign countries such as the campaign organized by online users against the visit of Saudi Crown

* On January 3, 2018, the "Fesh Nestanew", "What are we waiting for?" campaign requested the Tunisian government to amend the new finance law and denounce recent increases and economic choices by successive governments after the revolution. It was an open campaign for all people with their political, youth and social backgrounds.

** The campaign was launched by supporters of the African club following the death of a fan who drowned in the valley, after being chased by some security agents after the end of his team's match. This campaign received many interactions from the masses, where many Tunisians put the image of young Omar al-Obeidi on their pages on Facebook and wrote the words "Learn to Swim". The slogan was deduced from the eyewitness testimony of the incident, where the police chased the deceased young man and forced him to jump in the valley, although he informed them that he is not good at swimming, to be answered by one of the police officers "Learn to Swim".

Prince Mohammed bin Salman in November 2018,²⁷ who was planning to visit Tunisia after the case of the killing of "Jamal Khashoggi"* at the Saudi Embassy in Turkey.²⁸

The denunciation campaign started under the slogan "#la-ahlan-w-la-sahlan" which means "No Welcome", as these campaigns called people to participate in the protests, as the result was the emergence of demonstrations supported by civil and human rights associations and trade unions. In a letter addressed to the President of the Republic, the Press Syndicate deplored this visit, as a group of lawyers also filed a case to prevent the Saudi crown prince from visiting Tunisia.

Contrary to the protocols followed for such visits, the Saudi Prince's meeting with the Prime Minister ended in complete concealment, as the press conference was cancelled in an attempt to evade journalists'

²⁷ Paul Schemm, Alone in the Arab world, Tunisians can protest visit by Saudi crown prince, The Washington Post, November 27, 2018.

* On 2 October 2018, Jamal Khashoggi, a US-based journalist and critic of Saudi Arabia's government, walked into the country's consulate in Istanbul, where he was murdered. In the latest development, a United Nations special rapporteur concluded that Khashoggi was "the victim of a deliberate, premeditated execution, an extrajudicial killing for which the state of Saudi Arabia is responsible". They also found there was "credible evidence" that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other high-level officials were individually liable.

²⁸ Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death, BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>

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questions and content with a presidential statement.²⁹ In the past, there was no media and public uproar during the visit of an Arab official, as the visit of Prince Mohammed bin Salman did.

The community's perception of social media has changed and evolved from media sources to a part and lifestyle that accompanies them in the details of their daily lives such as boycott campaigns. Perhaps the most prominent of these campaigns is the campaign of boycotting the high cost in September 2019 under the slogan "Boycott of the high cost"³⁰. Where the Tunisians launched this campaign to boycott the high cost due to the government's failure to resist monopoly and to consolidate the culture of the boycott and improve the purchasing power, the number of participants reached more than 1585,000³¹ in the short time of its launch in its own group on social media. On the other hand, to emphasize the pressure that these virtual movements have played, images of garbage containers filled with large quantities of damaged food have spread on many other sites and pages, in addition to pictures and other reports showing price reductions for some products, indicating the start of the response of traders to compress the boycott campaign.

²⁹ An open letter to Mr. Al-Baji Kaid Essebsi, President of the Tunisian Republic, Tunisia on 11/23/2018. <http://www.snjt.org> .

³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/367642327450257/>. Accessed November 28, 2019.

³¹ Ibid.

This campaign represented a hypothetical state of consciousness, as it turned into an act of reality imposing the facts and wishes of a number of consumers that were welcomed and supported. Once again, these campaigns, which express the despair of the street from state policy, take the initiative through social media as a means of organizing, initiating and pressure on the parties involved. Tunisian youth have always found themselves able to impose their opinion on reality and change some decisions and facts, even partially through the virtual world.

These campaigns differed from traditional moves because it did not need a headquarters, a leader or funding, it is enough to create a page on social networking sites such as Facebook and mobilize active users interested in the issue to mobilize the masses. These sites are an outlet for the masses, to express their opinions freely and to self-determination by pressing the government through the street. These networks have also made the separation between virtual and realism just a thin line that reflects the will of the people and their level of consciousness, therefore, the social and political transformations of the current and future have become shaped by Facebook and Twitter and Instagram.

The new media has enabled individuals to create their own media outlets that are widely available and cheap, characterized by media diversity (text, image, audio, video) so that people all over the world come together on common issues that affect them and they can

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influence it. This came through the provision of tools for the expression of opinion, characterized by ease, spread, and low cost.

- **The role of social media in shaping public opinion in the 2019 presidential election**

There is a role for social media, in general, in resolving major conflicts, unrest, and mobilizing public opinion, where the revolutions in relation to the Arab Spring would not have occurred without the role played by social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, in mobilizing public opinion. It can be said that «Social Media» has become a new kitchen for the industry and generate a new public opinion on issues and topics, and an effective tool cannot be overlooked. As well as the reality has changed and the place of campaigning has changed, where the street is no longer the place where politicians seek to rally supporters and convince voters.

The paradox of Kais Saied's victory in Tunisia's last premature election on September 15, 2019,* at the expense of well-known political figures

* Presidential elections were held in Tunisia on 15 September 2019, the second direct vote for the presidency since the 2011 revolution. The elections had originally been planned for 17 and 24 November but were brought forward after the death of incumbent president Beji Caid Essebsi on 25 July to ensure that a new president would take office within 90 days, as required by the constitution. As no candidate received a majority of the vote in the first round, a runoff was held on 13 October between the top two candidates, Kais Saied and Nabil Karoui.

backed by major parties with logistical means (financial and media support), as well as he does not appear in the private media like other candidates. That posed a question about the ability of the new media and the role of social networking site "Facebook" as a source and a platform where the public show its power, in creating alternative and influence public opinion and make.

In the first round of presidential voting, all the major-party candidates (26 candidates) were knocked out, leaving two contenders: Kais Saied, a previous law professor who claimed 18.4 per cent of the vote as an independent, and Nabil karoui, a businessman and co-owner of a Television network, who won 15.6 per cent.³² In the second round, candidate Saied won by 72.71% against his opponent Nabil karoui with 27.29%, where the number of voters reached 3,892,085 out of 7,074,566 registered in the elections.³³

Mr. Said is a professor of law and an expert in constitutional affairs. He ran an independent and simple campaign that made little effort to reach out to voters in constituencies. He was not well known in political circles, nor did he have party support and did not attend any political meetings. While his opponent, Mr. Karoui, head of the "Heart of Tunisia" party, was a well-known media personality with well-known

³² Les résultats préliminaires de l'élection présidentielle 2019," the preliminary results of the 2019 presidential election." <http://www.isie.tn/> Accessed November 30, 2019.

³³ Ibid.

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international relations. He is well known by using his own television station to advertise his charity work in poor areas of the country under the auspices of his charity "Khalil Tunis". He was arrested before the campaign began as a result of years of charges of tax evasion and money laundering, where he remained in prison throughout the campaign period and voting.

By comparing the strength of both candidates, it can be believed that the winner will be candidate Nabil Karoui for possessing financial and media capabilities in addition to his party, which supports him. But this did not happen, which led us to question the reasons that helped Said to win both rounds in front of the well-known candidates in the political and media, supported by party and financial forces.

At the outset, it should be noted that the recent presence of politicians on social media sites, Tunisian political figures have entered the social media spaces to position themselves in the political arena and win supporters, as they are convinced that the battle and the industry of public opinion have turned to Facebook, Twitter and other websites. The technological revolution has changed the concept of political practice from the partisan field as usual to the virtual realm, where the individual is capable of determining its own orientations and choose the political entity to which it is biased electively and politically after following all parties and orientations.

For example, in the recent Tunisian presidential elections, the presence of politicians on social media pages is a milestone in promoting themselves and their project, especially since the Tunisian people consider social networking sites an important source of news. A survey conducted by “Barrlaman” site in 2018 confirms that social networking sites have become the main source of news for Tunisians, as Facebook is the main source of information for 41% of Tunisians, followed by only 19% for television in the municipal elections.³⁴

Most of the TV channels and radio stations coverage shed light on the major parties and well-known personalities, neglecting the other candidates, their activities and their movements, as some channels maintained their absolute support for certain candidates and not others, such as Nessma TV channel,* which maintained the support of its owner Karoui. Whereas, some channels launched campaigns against some candidates, such as the case on the “Al-Hewar Al-Tunisi” TV channel and its campaigned against the independent candidate Saied.

As a result of this campaign, the supporters of the independent candidate, Saied, launched a campaign on the social networking site

³⁴ Mohamed HADDAD, A survey analysis: to what extent do Tunisians trust the media? , September 25, 2018.

"(تحليل) إلى أي مدى يثق التونسيون في وسائل الإعلام؟"

* Nessma TV is a commercial TV channel located in Tunisia, The TV channel was launched on March 16, 2007, by Nabil karoui (2007).

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“Facebook” against the “Al-Hewar Al-Tunisi” channel, rejecting what they considered targeting and defamation of the journalist commentators in the daily program “Tunisia Today” for the candidate Sa’id, who exported the results of the first round by 18.4%. The angry supporters at the channel’s performance launched a campaign to remove the subscription sign "like" from the channel’s official page on Facebook, which made the channel lose nearly 900,000 likes in less than 24 hours.³⁵ This non-serious performance by the traditional media gave more power and space to the audience who did not see themselves and their opinions in this media resorting to social media to express their views and criticize and analyze the developments of events in the country.

Accordingly, the traditional media role has been decreased to the point of talking about the crisis of losing the public's confidence in the traditional media. Today, Tunisia is entering a new stage with a new form of public opinion industry, conveying a different picture of what was transmitted by traditional and official media. Nowadays, even if television remains the master of the scene in many countries, the content that arrives from the new content makers, who take social media as a platform for them, is indispensable.

³⁵ <https://www.tuniscope.com/article/184537/tech/reseaux-sociaux/elhiwar-ettounsi-125012> Accessed December 1, 2019.

In the second round of the election, the Saied election campaign became a youth campaign, characterized by humour, banter, and ridicule, while the digital space, which becomes a major player in advertising and marketing, has been flooded with numerous messages, videos and satirical images published by bloggers against the opposing candidate.

Although, the candidate Saied, has refused to campaign for the sake of equal opportunities with his opponent Karoui, who was imprisoned for financial corruption and money laundering charges, the "Heart of Tunisia" party continued the campaign of Karoui, led by his wife, in the form of field visits and popular meetings, in addition to the media support carried out by his own channel.

Today, technology managed to impose the public power at the expense of traditional media, the thing that characterized social networks with an interactive, participatory, and immediate feature that gave the public the ability to live the event and receive the news simultaneously. This can be clearly seen in the interaction and commentary of young people on the presidential debates that were broadcast on many TV and radio channels, moment by moment on social media sites under the hashtag #Tunisian debates.

The comments were between support for some positions and ridicule from others, users shared parts of funny passages in the candidates' interventions of the presidential debates. Social media users have also created groups and pages on Facebook to support the candidate Saied,

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relying on individual efforts to publish videos, blogs and pictures of him far from professional.

On the other hand, some of these pages, which were marked by randomness, populism, and disorganization, attacked the opponent Karoui and the political class supporting him by publishing contents of leaked videos accusing him of complicity and working with a former agent in the Israeli Mossad to manage his campaign.³⁶ In addition to publishing many audio and visual contents that accuse candidate Karoui by trading with the feelings of poor people and exploiting their need through his charity organization to win their electoral votes, and other publications that put the villager and classify him as a corrupt politician.

Although Saied did not campaign, as he did not have a tangible presence on the ground, there are no advertising banners or advertising videos, even his movements are almost non-existent compared to the campaign of his opponent who, despite being in prison during the campaign period and did not leave it until two days before the polling day, his party was carrying out the necessary field and media campaign in the whole country. The thing that indicates that all this media and field effort did not succeed in front of the electronic campaigns led by unregulated youth volunteers on social media. Therefore, it can be

³⁶ \$ 1 million for lobbying for Nabil Karoui?, HuffPost, Tunisia 03/10/2019, https://staging.contributor.huffpostmaghreb.com/#!/entry/1-million-de-dollars-pour-du-lobbying-au-profit-de-nabil-karoui-le-dirigeant-du-parti-9alb-tounes-hatem-mliki-dement_mg_5d95d8f8e4b0da7f66223d87 Accessed December 2, 2019.

concluded that despite all this media and field effort, they did not succeed in front of the electronic campaigns led by a volunteer and disorganized youth on social media.

The thing that indicates that all this media and field effort did not succeed in front of the electronic campaigns led by unregulated youth volunteers on social media. Therefore, it can be concluded that despite all this media and field effort, they did not succeed in front of the electronic campaigns led by a volunteer and disorganized youth on social media.

The Tunisian citizen exercised digital citizenship through social networking sites without the need for organizational or party guardianship within a stage of political awareness that young people have reached to fight corruption. As they also considered it as a critical point to confront the prevailing system with its media and financial machines, where it was a clear message to the rest of the parties and the regime on dissatisfaction and distrust.

Nowadays, these technologies have played an important role in shaping people's political awareness, by providing them with political information and have contributed to the formation and strengthening of their political culture. Political awareness is a set of values, trends and political principles that allow an individual to participate effectively in the situations and problems of his society, analyzes and determines his position towards them, and leads him to move to develop and change

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them.³⁷ The people became no longer only a passive mass receiving information, but their authority has grown and has become a source and an engine of political reality. This momentum on Facebook and the popular support for candidate Saied pushed many who were not interested in politics and public affairs and those who are reluctant to go to the polling stations to change their minds and go to elect him, as it also pushed several political parties to declare their support for him in the second round.

The electronic media helped to draw a picture in the minds of the voters about both candidates by what has been published about them, where Saied was classified as an alternative and clean politician, while Karoui was classified as a corrupt candidate who trades in people's miseries. This picture prompted a large number of Tunisians to vote for Saied, despite their lack of conviction with him, only to cut the path in front of his competitor and not to contribute to the spread of corruption, according to their opinion.

Saied's popular support in the elections was a result of a strong push and an electronic campaign that was in large part voluntary beside his little personal material resources. The first driver of this campaign was the youth who influenced the change of events and the formation of public opinion, as their campaign in social networking sites managed to

³⁷ Badreddine, The role of new media in socialization and political practice, Op cit.

gain support in the virtual world and later move its results to the ground smoothly.

Hence, all this was reflected in the election results, according to the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), the turnout for the age group between 18 and 25 years was 11.6%, while turnout for the age group of 26 to 45 years was 39.2%. As these percentages are considered high compared to the rates registered in the legislative elections or the first round of the presidential elections. And according to reports published by the "Sigma Conseil Foundation" for sounding opinions, 90% of young people between the ages of 18 and 25 years voted for Saied.

This generation is considered a non-partisan and the generation of contemporary electronic culture. As an influencer and influenced by social networks, where Facebook represented one of the bearings of political upbringing and the election choices industry in a way that goes beyond class and ideological divisions. It also operates in a high network frame and outside the circle of traditional institutions, making it such a pressing force of popular criticism and express opinions outside the context of the formal and usual prevailing attitudes. Nowadays young people are directly related to how public opinion is formed, as the actors on the web pages and the internet users were young people, besides, those connected to the Internet have the ability to argue and to engage in new ways that increase their strength and impact, which facilitates the formation of public opinion.

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With the existence of the motives behind the opinion and pushing its owner to express it, such as the availability of communication means, the ability to discuss issues freely among people through the media, it can be said that all the reasons have been prepared to form public opinion in this model. As new technologies have managed to reverse the equation, on which the basic theories that explain public opinion were based.

It cannot be denied that there are many other factors that contributed to building public opinion in Tunisia and the presidential election campaign as a model, as historical, economic, political, and other factors play a role. But the interest in the relationship of social networks and the formation of public opinion was the impetus to focus on the extent, ability, and strength of these networks in the public opinion industry and its great impact on the reality of living, besides its ability to move the mass currents in this direction or that.

Conclusion

The influence of social networks on public opinion varies according to the strength of their influence on individuals and the way in which these networks penetrate their lives. Public opinion, by its nature and its stages of formation, needs the enthusiasm of the public, and crises and important events are usually the bells. Nowadays, a climate of rapprochement and attachment to human life has been formed on social

media, which has become a necessity posed by rapid changes in the world of mass communication.

Social media has played an effective role in providing people with much information and attitudes that have contributed to forming awareness, as these sites have become an effective means of influencing social and political events and in shaping public opinion. Although these methods were called the virtual world at the beginning of their emergence, as the relations between the participants differ from the quality of the normal relations between humans, but they proved that they are not in isolation from the existing reality, as well as this difference is what contributed to the production of new forms of mobilization by focusing on narrating facts and detailing them with sound, image, and word at the same time.

It can be said that the Tunisian revolution could not have developed in the way that occurred without the role played by social media through exchanging pictures and videos of the dead and wounded by the Tunisian police fire. The nature of the scenes transmitted by Internet users to the world accelerated the spread of discontent, as it helped to widen the range of protests that led to the downfall of the Ben Ali regime in less than a month.

These sites were a suitable place to provide the Tunisian public with information and allow them to have discussions and interactions with all developments and events taking place inside and outside the country. Especially since the Tunisian media is experiencing some difficulties in

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enrolling the course of events and meeting the needs of the Tunisian citizen, which prompted the Tunisian citizen to withdraw the rug of confidence and decided to rely on an alternative media in which he is a party. Social networks, especially Facebook, have played a central role in the revolution and beyond. The accelerating events that Tunisia is experiencing as a newly democratic country have made the citizen live a phase of awareness and interest in political affairs more than usual, as the citizen imposed himself on the political reality as an influential party pressing on governments and political forces.

The public, with its various components, turned to social media for expression and criticism, and with the passage of time and the accumulation of successful or failed experiences, the role of these networks has increased in the daily life of the Tunisian citizen. In addition, these networks became capable of building and demolishing, and able to establish and even destabilize the values, all according to the message source and its content. Today the individual has become a producer, sender, and receiver of information at the same time, as he took the journalist's mission of disseminating and analyzing information, which led to the emergence of a new pattern of opinion leaders influenced and affected.

Today, Tunisia is living in the post-media phase as a result of the spread of public power and thanks to the technical capabilities used, in an era when the new authority has exceeded all traditional media theories in the production of the idea, image, and discourse in its political, social

and economic forms, which would be a new factory for shaping public opinion.

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