

# Social Networking As an Ideology

**What links Occupy Wall Street to Tunisia to Syria isn't just the devices and technology that allow people to communicate with each other, but a culture that encourages personal expression at the expense of politics, media, and conventional institutions.**

by *Donatella Della Ratta*

In December 2011, while in Washington, D.C., I walked through the Occupy D.C. encampment of the protest movement that has spread from Wall Street to dozens of American cities, with demonstrators occupying plazas, parks, universities, all of them chanting the same “We’re the 99%” slogan, namely that they’re acting on behalf of the 99 percent of the people being held hostage by the richest one percent that runs the brazen corporate and financial worlds.

In February, police finally cleared central McPherson Square, the site of the D.C. movement. But when I was there the camp was busy gearing up for a police raid. Before me, stood a tall young man with blond hair. “I’m not afraid of tear gas,” he told me. “I’m Egyptian.” I was suddenly taken aback by my own prejudices. Why had I assumed that a WASP-looking man couldn’t be of Egyptian descent? Embarrassed, I decided to follow the rules of Middle Eastern hospitality and address greetings in Arabic. This time he was embarrassed. Unfortunately, he said, his parents hadn’t taught him Arabic. He then turned around and went back to his protest site.

The next month, in January 2012, I was in Tunis for the first anniversary of uprising that brought down autocratic President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Avenue Bourguiba, the main street of the capital, was filled with parades, people carrying flags and singing. The Tunisian people were finally taking time out to celebrate themselves and their

willingness to finally take on Ben Ali, who had been in power since 1987.

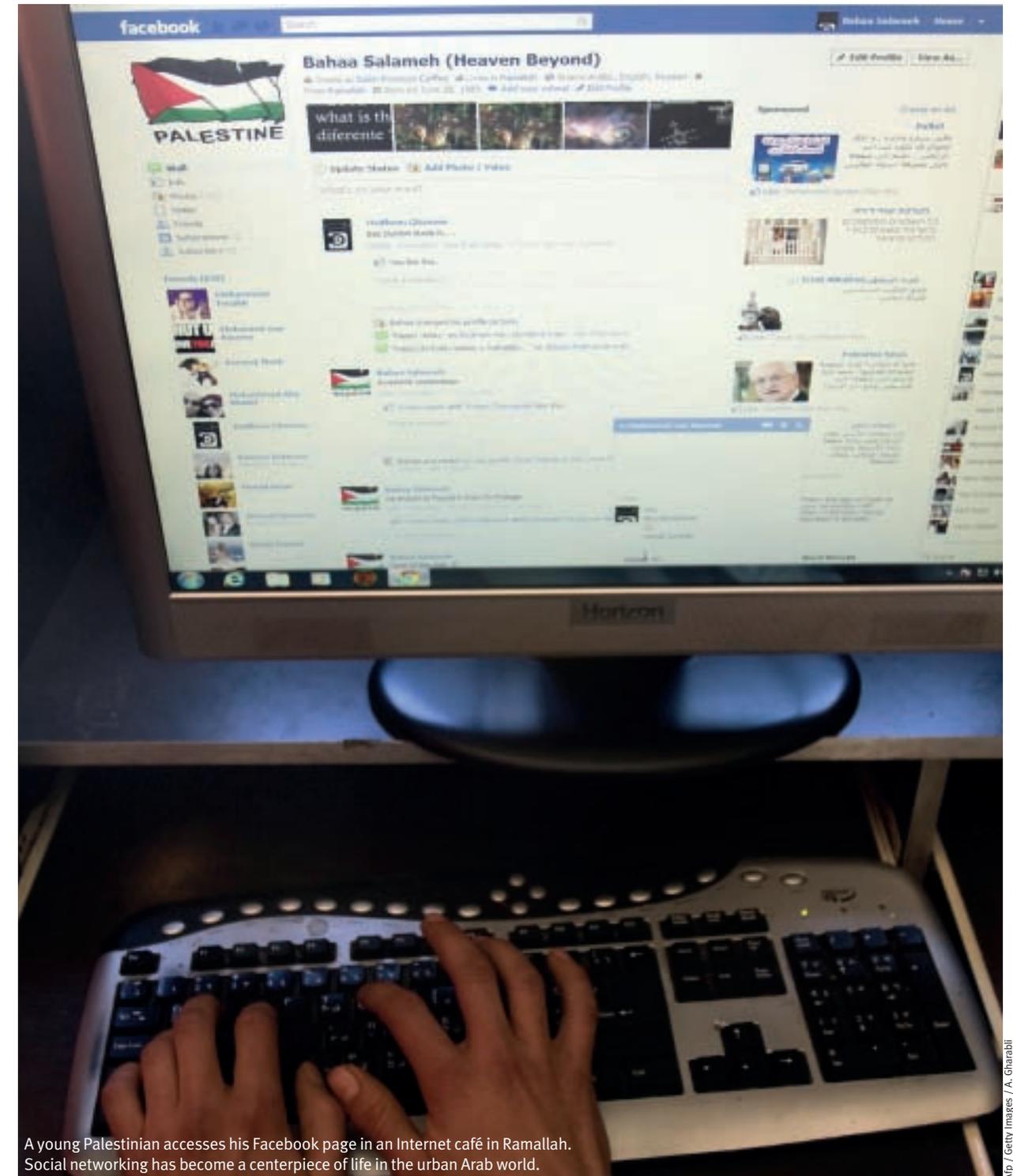
Having coffee and chatting with Tunisian friends in the center of town, the discussion turns to the city of Sidi Bouzid, which hosted the uprising’s seminal event. There, on Dec. 17, 2011, a 27-year-old street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight when local authorities confiscated his wares, humiliating him in public. He died 18 days later.

The Western viewpoint associates the Tunisian revolution with familiar symbols that include marchers shouting “Degage! degage!” (“Leave! Leave!”), local bloggers, and the perseverance of a small and cultured elite that decided to openly challenge power.

But one friend insists that fruit-selling vendor Bouazizi, who never graduated from high school let alone college, was the catalyst. So I take a bus to Sidi Bouzid, a four-hour, 200-kilometer ride. The verdant, Club Med coast yields to the desert. Sidi Bouzid is in central Tunisia. Not even revolutionaries necessarily know where it is.

There, Ali Bouazizi welcomes me, who is unrelated Mohamed. He was the first to discuss the incident, speaking to Al Jazeera on Dec. 17. In the interview, carried only on the Arabic-language station, Ali Bouazizi denounced the injustices Mohamed was forced to endure. He called him a young “graduate” who had become a street vendor to make ends meet, only to have what little he owned ripped away, and set himself alight in rage and despair. I ask Ali why he lied about Mohamed’s education only to understand the irrelevance of the question. Though the immolation was the straw that broke the camel’s back, behind it were years of pent-up indignation.

Youthful Ali Bouazizi, a longtime political activist and trade unionist, had long been quarreling with local authorities, staging anti-regime demonstrations and strikes that went unnoticed by media.



A young Palestinian accesses his Facebook page in an Internet café in Ramallah. Social networking has become a centerpiece of life in the urban Arab world.

AP / Getty Images / A. Gharabli



ZumaPress.com / P. Marovich

But after Mohamed's act, which he filmed (getting his friend Weil, a computer expert, to upload the horrific video), he called Al Jazeera. Ironically, Ali hadn't used his Facebook account, which he opened in 2009, until that day. The man who fired the first shot in what would later be known as the Twitter and Facebook-led uprising knew next to nothing about social networking and its power to sway public opinion.

His battle, like that of young people of Sidi Bouzid, was being played out in real life, and real time, something that continues to this day.

I'm in Syria, in Kafr Nabl, a village in the north of the country little known even to Syrians before the start of the uprising against President Hafez al-Assad. Now, it's a hub of anti-regime creativity. Daily, its population, most of them former farmers, produces some of the country's most inventive slogans. One of the most effective, and bittersweet, reads: "In Homs, all you need to do is cross a

Occupy DC demonstrators in Washington, D.C.

street to get to heaven." Another starkly gets to the reality of torture, which the townspeople and thousands of Syrians have had to endure: "Excuse me, lover, if I mentioned your name during the interrogation."

The villagers even managed put together an operetta where in which they all stand together intoning, "Cursed be thy soul, Hafez al-Assad." All the villagers get involved in these collective efforts using any means at their disposal.

A Syrian friend of mine who works in advertising said he'd never heard of Kafr Nabl until the protest movement began spreading. "If I could, I'd hire them all to work in my agency," he says, profoundly admiring of these people who moved from plowing fields to expressing courageous dissent, and doing so creatively.

This year, Facebook has gone political in Israel. In March, the walls of many Middle Eastern members were covered with colorful posters that read: "Iran, we won't bomb you" and "We love you." The man behind the campaign was a 40-year-old Tel Aviv resident eager to counterbalance the warmongering drumbeat in Israel's daily press, which has for months talked openly about a possible bombing attack against Iran to shut down its alleged nuclear weapons program. The images were supplied by people who agreed to be photographed at home, at work, and even with children, all of them holding peace messages.

Iranians replied with a viral campaign of their own, whose messages read: "Israeli friends, we don't hate you, we don't want war; we want love and peace." The virtual dialogue is in full swing on both sides. People are eager to talk, to communicate, and do so circumventing governments, the media, and established institutions.

Ideology in the time of the Arab revolts and the Occupy Wall Street movement is complex. While many regimens are still committed to fighting the wave of technological change and linkage in 20<sup>th</sup> century terms, namely with weapons, propaganda, biased media, party affiliations, and any number of conspiracy theories, most of the world has definitively joined the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that includes the demand that global citizenship be recognized in terms of domestic rule of law.

The new international citizenship puts affluent white Americans in concert with the dreamy peasants of Tahrir Square and the would-be Madison Avenue ad executives in northern. Social network belonging allows a young man in central Tunisia with hardly any understanding of familiarity to inflame the people the world over with a s-liver of video that soon goes viral. It also allows him to tell white lies about someone educational background. The new citizenship means Israelis and Iranians talking to each other without ever having met, but both sides united in a desire to avert war.

It's a form of citizenship inspired by networking culture, not the technology behind the devices. Those who talk about the Twitter and Facebook revolution are misguided because they place the emphasis on a technological advance. It's not that. The advance is a cultural phenomenon. Networking is beginning to take root even



Alp / Getty Images / F. Dubour

Protestors in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia pictured near a portrait of Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation helped trigger rioting.

where web technology isn't fully fleshed out, in rural Tunisia remote northern Syria. But people in these places are able to converse with their super-connected Occupy Wall Street brethren because what links them in the end is the culture of the network, and not its technology.

It's a culture based on sharing, on creativity, on user-generated content, and on the right of each and every human soul to participate and help if they choose to. It's culture based direct connection, without media, institutional, or political filters, where citizens are no longer the elector of voters but the creators of content and of relationships. If there's a thread that connects Kafr Nabel to Wall Street it's this new sense of citizenship. ●