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## Freedom of Information and Political Opportunities during the Arab Spring

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And Political Opportunities During the Arab Spring**

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\*References of the pictures can be found in the appendix.

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# Introduction

For most Middle East and North African (MENA) nations, the post-colonial era is characterized by high degrees of instability, socio-economic inequalities, and, the lack of fundamental political freedoms for citizens due to strict authoritarian rule. On the 17th of December 2010, **Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi** tragically sets himself on fire in Ben Arous, Tunisia, as a response to the systematic humiliation, harassment, and injustice he suffered from the abusive local police authorities. This event is perceived as the culminating point of the long-endured grievances of the people. The day after, protesters took the streets and demonstrated in memory of Tarek. This protest resulted in being the first of a long series, but most importantly became the catalyst of a broader revolution. The symbolism of the happenings in Tunisia rapidly spread and inspired similar attempts, producing a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings throughout the MENA region. The period that followed is later referred to as the Arab Spring.

For long, scholars sought to uncover the realities governing social movements' internal and external dynamics (McAdam, 1996; Emirbayer & Goldberg, 2005; Tarrow, 1993). On the one hand, social movements' actions and development are conditioned internally as they are highly dependent on their participants and their engagement. Conversely, the political and social context surrounding the movements also greatly impacts the course of events, appreciably through the rise of political opportunities. While multiple approaches to the concept exist, the term political opportunity is often used to refer to the effects of the external environment on contentious politics (Meyer, 2004). What this study does differently relating to the existing literature on the topic is twofold. In the first place, it approaches the Arab uprisings through a political opportunity theoretical framework, which is something that hasn't been explored enough by academics. Furthermore, this thesis assumes that freedom of information is part/incorporated in the opportunity structures. This assumption is built on the premise that freedom of information and freedom of communication media are dependent on a set of factors determined by broad-ranging externalities. In this sense, the environment in which information is produced and disseminated is reasonably a part constituting the external environment, namely political opportunities, affecting the course of contention.

The Arab uprisings have often been labeled as the '*Revolution 2.0*' (Ghonim, 2012), the '*Social Media Revolution*' (Guardian, 2016), or on other occasions the '*Aljazeera Revolution*' (Foreign Policy, 2011). These labels have appeared to be a source of controversy and debate among scholars. A focal aspect of the Arab Spring was the implication of communication media, and more predominantly social media, throughout the revolt. While extensive research has been made on the topic, the literature fails to settle on common grounds concerning the effects that social media had on collective action. Several researchers strongly support that news media were instrumental in the

building and development of civil societies during the Arab Spring and that without their utilization, the outcome of mobilization would have been different (Khan, 2013; Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Barakat & Fakhri, 2021). Other studies argue that media played a secondary role and that the studies focused redundantly on this variable to explain mobilization (Anderson, 2011). Building a theoretical argumentation based on previous studies and stressing the reliance of political opportunities on freedom of information to fully arise and reach their potential for mobilization, this paper adds to the debate the subsequent research question:

How did political opportunities lead to collective mobilization during  
the Arab Spring?

More precisely, this research is an attempt to show how information availability, which is dependent on the levels of freedom of the broader information environment, contributed to the rise of political opportunities during the Arab Spring, and consequently led the way to mobilization. Several steps are necessary to answer this question. First, an overall review of the literature is presented to build on the research and assess the extent to which the topic has been explored. Furthermore, a theoretical argumentation is built to support the hypothesis, which will be tested to answer the research question. In this regard, conceptualizing the main variables is an important step to make sense of how observations are interpreted and applied in this study. Moving on, the methodology section covers all the steps on how this research intends to uncover the broad causal pathway that led to mobilization during the Arab Spring. Finally, the analysis will present the evidence and results gathered, comparing and examining the findings with the scope of demonstrating how political opportunities were reliant, to some extent, on freedom of information.

## Literature Review

### *1. From grievances to resistance*

To effectively address collective demands, governments must be able to assess the needs of all sectors of the population while ensuring fundamental rights, political freedoms, and reasonable opportunities for citizens to express their opinions (Hirschman, 1970). When governments fail to address the needs of their population, citizens feel deprived relative to their socially conditioned expectations. In an attempt to demonstrate under what conditions grievances translate into collective action, Walder (2009) proposes that when this deprivation is collectively perceived as unjust and opposing socio-cultural normative treatment expectations, citizens are driven towards resistance and revolt. In line with this idea, Jasper (2011) contends that governments that fail to protect and aid their

population are targets of protests. For long social movement scientists and researchers have debated the role of grievances for collective action. On the one hand, multiple studies acknowledge that grievances have a strong influence on the course of contention (Opp, 1988; Lee, 2016; McGarty & al., 2014). On the other hand, different branches of the literature suggest that, while grievances do have an impact on the formation of resistance, they fail to explain the rise of mobilization and the spread of dissent (Buechler, 1993; Jenkins, 1983).

In his study about resistance dynamics and social movements, Lee (2016) finds that resistance is determined to a great extent by shared grievances. He argues that long-endured grievances are what motivates individuals to organize efforts aiming at resisting/disrupting the established civil order. Accordingly, Walder (2009) suggests that popular discontent can be perceived as an opportunity to engage in collective action. The concern of popular discontent is also apparent in Opp's (1988) study where he shows how grievances lead to more political participation, especially through the formation of oppositional structures built around widespread grievances. On this basis, Hirschman (1970) proposes the term *disorderly voice* to explain the process through which popular discontent catalyzes into collective action. Protests, rioting, and street violence are examples of *disorderly voice*; they can alter the stability of a government or perhaps its fate. In this sense, through pressure, publicity, and complaints, the voice of the public can cut through hierarchical control in public administration and help strengthen accountability.

A central aspect of the study of grievances is the role of emotions. After all, grievances are a product of individuals' emotions and perceptions of reality (Walder, 2009; Jasper 2011). In this regard, emotions are a component of contention worth stress; they shape the course of events, interpretations, and individual engagement in the movement (Jasper, 2011). Other studies are more reluctant on the role of emotion. This reluctance comes from different conceptualizations of the term, but most importantly because of the dichotomy between emotion and reason, put forward and defended by multiple schools of thought (Walder, 2009). Social movements becoming less informal and more institutionalized made studies steer towards an organizational approach rather than focusing on grievances and emotions to explain collective action (Buechler, 1993). In broad, the reason and desire dichotomy entail that individual are driven primarily by their rationality, and not their emotions. Emirbayer & Goldberg (2005) further developed these concerns by stating that reason and emotion are complementary and not exclusive. One of their main arguments stands in the different types of actors engaging in contention; those driven by strategic considerations (leaders) and those driven by emotions (followers). This classification of actors complies with the expectations of the reason/desire dichotomy and shows that emotions matter in contentious politics.



## *2. Opportunity structures and mobilization*

The previous part showed the instrumentality of grievances in the emergence of resistance and contention; while they do have an impact on efforts of mobilization, solely, they can hardly explain the phenomenon. In this regard, Simmons (2014) stresses the importance of incorporating grievances in social movement analysis, while linking them with other approaches and theories of mobilization to refine our understanding of the matter. McAdam (1982) was one of the first to emphasize the effects of the broader political environment on mobilization structures and movements' dynamics, namely political opportunities. His work gained prominence and directed much of the literature towards studies exploring the different effects of the concept on mobilization, and contentious politics as a whole. Political opportunities are known to affect the emergence, strength, behavior, and strategy of a movement (Suh, 2001). Coming back to grievances, Opp (1988) suggests that only when they are perceived as opportunities by individuals, do they become incentives for social movement participation and mobilization. For this, a way to incentivize individuals to participate in social movements is strategic framing: the framing of both grievances and political arguments by groups seeking the creation of opportunities for collective action (Lee, 2016). Strategic framing is a very effective way to achieve mass mobilization and has gained significant influence in the literature.

In the past, social movements emerged more indigenously and had fewer organizational structures, whereas, today movements are increasingly structured and institutionalized (Jenkins, 1983; Buechler, 1993). The rise of institutional collective action attracted the attention of numerous scholars who sought to understand the implications of these new forms of organization on contentious politics. Lee (2016) argues that resistance requires a wide set of resources and organizational capacities to emerge and sustain the repression. He adds that coordination and diffusion of information among civil societies are enabled by pre-existing networks and organizations. Jenkins (1983) also defends that the potential for mobilization is largely determined by the degree of preexisting structures and if the goal of the movement is defined and institutionalized. However, these views contrast with Suh's (2001) proposition that activists do not choose strategies and goals, rather the political context sets the grievances around which individuals mobilize, restraining some claims and tactics while promoting others. Accordingly, Pearlman's (2020) theory of mobilizing from scratch shows how collective action can emerge without pre-existing organization, illustrating how protest can surface in a highly repressed environment. Meyer (1996;2004) greatly contributed to the literature on political opportunities and defended on numerous occasions the relevance of the concept/theory for the field of research, promising a systematic way to study how social movements respond and are affected by the external environment. Although, how opportunities translate into mobilization is still debated, Meyer & Staggenborg (1996) presented four variables explaining when

they are most likely to arise: (1) increasing access to the political system, (2) divisions among elites, (3) availability of elites allies, (4) diminishing state repression. The presence of one, or several, of these determinants would result in ‘expansive opportunities’ for collective action (Meyer, 2004; Suh, 2001). Conversely, movements tend to decline in times of ‘declining opportunities’ (Meyer, 2004). Nonetheless, ‘declining opportunities’ can also happen to foster insurgency, for example by reinforcing grievances and strengthening collective identities (Simmons, 2014).

### *3. Literature on the Arab Spring*

The wave of protest that surfaced throughout the MENA region from 2010 onwards attracted the interest of different branches of academia. Particularly, the Arab Spring rapidly caught the eye of social movement scientists given the singularity, amplitude, and rapidity of the events. In this regard, the existent body of literature on the topic is extensive, exploring the different dimensions of the revolution as well as the development and outcome of contention (Salvatore, 2011; Barakat & Fakhri, 2021; Delacoura, 2012; Ghanem, 2016). A particular aspect of the uprisings which has received significant attention is the role social media played during the revolt.

“Governments across the world have been continuously developing and refining a whole arsenal of tools to surveil, manipulate, and censor the digital flow of information in the realm of their authority” (Gohdes, 2020, p. 488). This is, even more, the case in authoritarian regimes, and among the MENA states, where the central authority attempts to control the flow of information and seeks to fill the mass media with a stream of pro-government messages (Geddes & Zaller, 1989). This is because autocracies are suspicious of civic activism that threatens the status quo. In this respect, social media, and other forms of communication media, altered the relationship between the authority and citizens by challenging the state monopoly of information (Dalacoura, 2011; Smidi & Shahin, 2017). The unfolding of the online world has created a whole new dimension to the exchange of information; the growth of ICTs (Information and Communication Technology) has given people the ability to not only access a wide range of information but also to share and produce it, transforming a once unidirectional channel for communication into a bidirectional one (Weidmann, 2019). Consistently, the expansion of new media has had an impact on undermining authoritarian rule (Norris, 2012). This also coincides with Smidi & Shahin's (2017) findings that higher levels of internet connectivity correlate with higher levels of collective defiance and unrest. Building on this, McGarty & al. (2014) found that ICTs greatly facilitated the course of contention during the Arab Spring specifically through three procedures. Firstly, the internet contributes to the acceleration of processes that are normally slow, principally the spread and promotion of information. Moreover, ICTs strengthen mobilization structures by increasing organizational capacities. Finally, communication media can



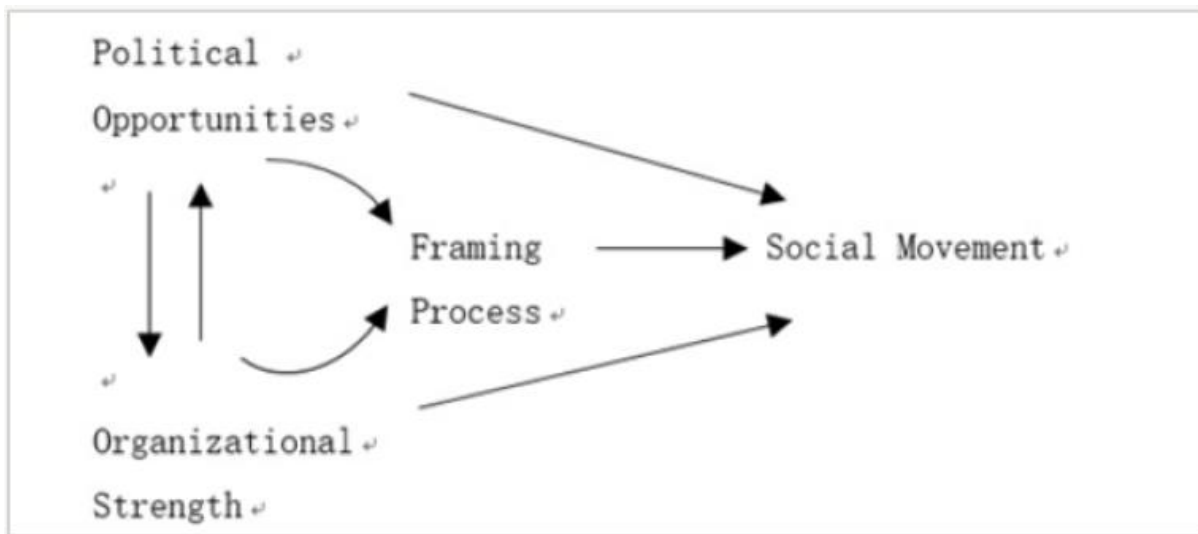
increase support and legitimacy of the movement through strategic framing and the dissemination of dissent. Salvatore (2011) also praised the role of the internet during the uprisings: “virtual and public spaces came into a mutual synergy and produced a formidable potential for mobilizing a broad variety of actors” (p.11). He further developed the importance of individualistic experiences and ‘citizen journalists’ in the conveyance of narratives and sustaining of contention. Lotan (2011) similarly supported that ‘citizen journalists’ appeared more effective disseminators of information than traditional organizations. However, other research suggests that the revolution took place on the street and not in the digital realm, supporting the idea that mobilization occurred regardless of the presence of social media (Anderson, 2011; Ghanem, 2016, Barakat & Fakih, 2021).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *1. Argument*

As seen beforehand, numerous theories and concepts within the literature on political contention sought to uncover the different realities behind social movement dynamics. However, it is mainly three frameworks that dominate the literature; Political Opportunities – Framing process – Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) (Simmons, 2014). The three components together broadly constitute the political process theory proposed by McAdam (1982). As seen in figure 1, the three theories are not exclusive, rather they interact and play different roles at different times. In the early stages of contention, political opportunities are primordial to look at as they set the grievances around which individuals mobilize and the potential for mobilization (Suh, 2001). Once favorable opportunities emerge and are perceived as such, resources and organization come to play an important role and are considered essential for them to evolve into sustained collective action. Accordingly, Buechler (1993) and Jenkins (1983), adherents of the RMT approach, defended that social movements prevail through a wide set of resources and that the outcome of mobilization is determined by the cooptation of institutional capacities. This implies that opportunities are largely dependent on social structures, requiring resources and capabilities to fully arise and lead to mobilization. On the other hand, strategic framing runs through the whole process, shaping new opportunities and facilitating social movement organization. Whereas each case is context-dependent, the political process model offers good explanatory leverage for the occurrence of mobilization and the study of contention.

**Figure 1:** Relations between the elements of the political process theory



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As previously stated, this thesis assumes that freedom of information and the media environment is part of the broader external environment, namely political opportunities. In an attempt to demonstrate the causal pathway that led to mobilization, this research will explore how the media environment interacts with mobilizing structures, and produce opportunities through strategic framing processes. Furthering the logic and meaning behind this claim, I argue that communication media and freedom of information expanded opportunities for mobilization and promoted participation in contention by enhancing attributes respective to each model. In other words, this paper treats the relation between the independent variable, political opportunities, and the dependent variable, mobilization, exploring the effect of the media environment on the association. The analysis will make sense of the results and findings, with the scope of uncovering the effect of the information environment on the prevalence and applicability of the political process theory among the selected cases. Improved access to information – dissemination of dissent

## 2. Hypotheses

It is important to make the distinction between hypotheses and predictions. The former refers to an idea tested through the formulation of an expected outcome; the latter refers to expected results (Farji-Brener & Amador-Vargas, 2014). For the sake of this research, a broad hypothesis is proposed, subdivided into different ‘sub-hypotheses’. This will enable the integration of broad ideas as well as specific ones, all tested under the same framework (Heger & Jeschke, 2014). Besides, having sub-hypotheses will permit to better examine the steps through which mobilization occurred, testing the

relevance or peculiarity of particular mechanisms by comparing the findings between the three cases. Appropriately to the political process model, each sub-hypotheses will test the effect of freedom of information on the respective characteristics of each approach. The general hypothesis that this study will test is the following:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Higher levels of freedom in the information environment will lead to expansive opportunities for collective participation in contentious politics.

Mcgarty & al. (2014) advanced that new technologies provide the necessary social conditions enabling the formation of collective identities, particularly in autocratic settings. In the first place, increased access to information gives people more opportunities to question norms and values, specifically by pointing out the unequal deprivation individuals endure relative to their social expectations (Walder, 2009). This increases general levels of awareness among the society (Beck & Hüser, 2012). Consistently, increased access to information has been found to be positively correlated with political awareness, which is a determinant of popular support; the more politically aware a person is, the higher the chances of them being critical of authority (Geddes & Zaller, 1989). In this sense, communication media is an instrument that can be used for the sharing of resentment, resentment that culminates in the formation of collective identities engendering a cascade of disobedience. This supports the idea that crowd achieve a common purpose and take common action by forming collective identities (Mcgarty & al. 2014). The first sub-hypotheses goes as follow:

**H<sub>1.1</sub>** = Dissemination of dissent through communication media produced opportunities for the emergence of protest through the formation of collective identities.

Approaching freedom of information and communication media as resources for the organization of contention is also explored in this research. Starting from the RMT premise that individuals are rational actors that weigh the costs and benefits of participating in contention, Buechler (1993) adds that resources and organizational capacities are determinants for the emergence of large-scale mobilization. Moreover, virtual communications have been found to be instrument facilitating the organization of collective action (Weidmann & Rød, 2019; Beck & Hüser, 2012). Similarly, when analyzing the effect of social media on mobilization structures during the Arab Spring, Smidi & Shahin (2017) found that “social media served as an instrument of local and national mobilization, communication, and coordination; helped propagate international revolutionary contagion; and contributed to the enhancement of a pan-Arab consciousness which facilitated the contagion process” (p. 198). This thesis will further explore the topic; hence the second sub-hypothesis goes as follow:

**H<sub>1.2</sub>** = News technologies and communication media facilitated the organization of contention and increased mobilization structures

On this line, Gamson & Wolfsfeld (1993) argue that increased resources and organizational capacities are correlated with a more efficient diffusion of sympathetic frames, which results in promoting popular support for the movement. Furthermore, this thesis is interested in testing the effect of strategic framing on the four stages of mobilization proposed by Klandermans & Oegama (1987); (1) becoming sympathetic to the cause – (2) becoming target of recruitment – (3) becoming motivated in participating – (4) participating in contention. The analysis will make sense of strategic framing on social media platforms affected the cost and benefit analysis of individuals for participating in protest action. This research's tentative prediction is that increased exchanges of information defying official frames contribute to the cognitive liberation of individuals by showing them their potential for mobilization. Communication through social platforms and increased access to information, which are enabled when the media environment allows it, can cognitively liberate individuals in different ways. On the one hand, the dissemination of dissent can result in expansive opportunities for mobilization by showing the extent to which grievances are shared (Opp, 1988). This increases confidence and interpretations of capacities the movement has, which as result becomes means for the development of contention (Mcgarty & al. 2014). In addition, the diffusion of content displaying violent repression can foster insurgency by reinforcing grievances (Simmons, 2014). The third sub-hypotheses goes as follow.

**H<sub>1.3</sub>** = Strategic framing through communication media promoted social movement participation by cognitive liberating individuals about the potential for mobilization.

## **Methodology**

### *1. Research design*

The combination of qualitative and quantitative research tools is proposed for this study for different reasons. Firstly, by bringing these two approaches together, an improvement in the evaluation of the results is expected because the data is balanced by the strength of another. Namely, this implies that the results from the qualitative part will add interpretative substance to the quantitative results. Vice-versa, the quantitative data gathered will support the drawn interpretations, add relevancy to the research, and provide a better understanding of the matter. These results will be used to reconstitute the broad causal pathway that led to mobilization during the Arab Spring. This research proposes a qualitative content analysis (QCA) based on web archives of discussion forums

from 2010 and 2011. In this regard, different data items are drawn for each case and are analyzed considering the dimensions established in the coding framework. The strength of this method of analysis is that it enables the study of communicative messages while increasing the overall understanding and meaning behind the topic, besides emphasizing expressions, tones, and language (Halperin & Heath, 2017). This is particularly relevant for this research whereas the collected data is formed from conversations on forums and other types of direct communication between individuals that require more interpretation. On top of that, quantitative data is used to support the interpretations from the QCA and to aggregate levels of media restrictiveness, as well as providing more concrete measures on the outcome of this study: mobilization.

## *2. Case selection*

While the three countries and the happening of events differ considerably, these cases were selected because of various similarities; the three countries experienced popular uprisings during the same period, with a common endpoint; greater political and social freedom. Moreover, uprisings in each case led to the overthrow of authoritarian rule. Tunisia succeeded in the overthrow of the former president Ben Ali who held a tight grip on power for more than twenty years only a few weeks of sustained contention. Similarly, through sustained pressure, Egyptian protesters succeeded in overthrowing the former president Mubarak after 18 days of demonstration. Mobilization outcome in Libya slightly differs. Whereas the despotic ruler Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime was overthrown, the events preceding his removal differed from the events witnessed in Egypt and Tunisia (Anderson, 2011). The historical context behind each case will be further developed in the analysis. These cases have also been selected because of the timing of the uprisings; they were all sudden and simultaneous. The fact that insurgency emerged simultaneously suggests that the cases share common features and some degree of interconnection (Anderson, 2011). This supports the claim that Arab societies do have tight interconnections and share at least some characteristics (Dalacoura, 2012).

Therefore, this study is based on a Most Similar System Design (MSSD). This approach is used for the reason that the cases share a wide set of similarities, as discussed above, but differ in one independent variable (Halperin & Heath 2012), in this case, political opportunities and media openness. Contrarily, the dependent variable of the study, collective mobilization, is similar across the cases, as it should be when using a MSSD, in the sense that the three countries faced a wave of protests, which in this paper is the studied outcome. The use of such design needs clarification whereas similarities in the dependent variable would imply no explanatory leverage for explaining why political opportunities matter for mobilization when using a MSSD. In this respect, this study will not only focus on whether mobilization occurred, rather it will try to show variation in

mobilization according to differences in political opportunities and freedom of information among the three cases. This should reinforce the relevancy and validity of the research.

### 3. Coding Framework

The coding frame permitted me to search and identify concepts but also find a relation between them by summarizing themes and patterns. This is done in accordance with the scope of the research; focusing on meaning and interpretations of the data. To systematically make sense of the gathered data, a coding framework regrouping different themes and dimensions of the topic is put in place. In this respect, classifying the data around different dimensions is a necessary step to identify interactions at different levels. To answer the research question, five exclusive dimensions are built. A simplified version of the coding framework is presented below, the full coding framework is presented in the appendix.

Dimensions	Conceptualization	Sub-categories
<b>Freedom of Information</b>	Freedom of information is the degree by which individuals can access, produce and disseminate information content. Put more bluntly, it refers to the level of freedom in the diffusion and acquisition of information in the broader media environment.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Organizational production of news</li> <li>2. Independent production of news</li> </ol>
<b>Mobilization</b>	Refers to the assembly of a group sharing the same ambitions/aspirations, with the aim of advancing a common goal. We may refer to it as a process rather than a phenomenon, where individuals assemble resources and capacities around shared grievances to organize collective action.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mobilization structure</li> <li>2. Mobilization outcome</li> </ol>
<b>Grievances</b>	Grievances can be conceptualized in different manners. This research approaches the term with Simmons's (2014) conceptualization; a cause of distress prevalent enough for the emergence of resistance.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Motivation for participating in contention</li> <li>2. Collective identities</li> </ol>
<b>Repertoires of contention</b>	Broadly, contention refers to the disagreement between two parties. Repertoires of contention consist of all the available tools, capacities strategies and actions available to a movement for the sustaining of contention.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Movement repertoire and tactics</li> <li>2. State repertoire and tactics</li> </ol>

#### *4. Data and sources*

Insights on the effect of political opportunities on mobilization will be provided based on the analysis and evaluation of the collected data. Namely, the data consists of web archives of newspaper articles and forum discussions from the years 2010 and 2011. The data selection is based on two criteria. First, sources are collected in consideration of the timeline. In effect, the dates from which the articles or discussion were produced approximately coincide among the three cases, capturing a longitudinal reconstitution of contention throughout the months. Nonetheless, given the different paths that led to mobilization in the three countries, important dates and transformative events vary between cases. In this sense, the sources are also selected in consideration of the chronological timeline of events respective to each case. That is, important dates are selected a priori to the first criteria. Take for example the case of Egypt. In Egypt, the months of January and February 2011 have been considered transformative whereas several events happened during that period. Accordingly, number of sources from that period will be more prevalent.

The ‘Internet Global Archive Events’ provides the archiving and preservation of dynamic web materials, “ensuring perpetual access to diverse, cultural, and historically-relevant digital collection from around the world” (Archive-it, 2014). Capturing events-based collections, this archive comprises substantial material (blogs, news sites, social media discussions, official reports) from the years 2010-2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Global voices is an international community of writers and digital activists that aim at translating and reporting conversations and perspectives emerging from citizens, or ‘citizen media’. During times of contention, the site produced a considerable amount of information and relayed opinions while advocating for freedom of expression and protecting ‘citizens’ journalists’ rights. This type of source is considered suited for this research as it encompasses both micro and macro levels, meaning that it explains macro events through individualistic experiences and vice-versa. A challenge of the data gathered is providing contextualization of the events. While web archiving captures content, it fails to capture the entire web experience during that time; how people reacted and interacted with that information.

In addition, quantitative data and descriptive statistics are used as means of contextualization and support for the interpretations made throughout the QCA. Quantitative data will be used specifically for the measures of two main variables; (1) freedom of information and (2) mobilization. For the measure of freedom of information two indexes are selected. Freedom House (2011) proposes a yearly report comprising the freedoms of the net worldwide. The report measures obstacles to access, limitations of content, and violations of user rights and scores countries on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). Accordingly, freedom of the press will be assessed based on the freedom of the press 2011 report, again proposed by Freedom House (2011). The report measures are based on



levels of media regulations, editorial pressure, and news indexing to name a few. These indicators taken together offer solid measures for information availability. As for more concrete measures of mobilization, quantitative data about protest frequency, turnout, and intensity is suggested. In this regard, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) provides extensive insights into crises, political violence, and contention worldwide.

## **Analysis**

The analysis of the sources provided numerous insights on the emergence of mobilization and the course of contention in the three cases of this study. The results are regrouped into themes and will be presented accordingly. After the systematic sorting of the data following the coding guidelines and dimensions established at the start, the analysis suggests three different patterns by which the external environment, and more precisely the media environment, expanded opportunities for participation in collective action. In this regard, news technologies and freedom of information have been found to affect three mechanisms related to mobilization structures and outcomes. The following part will make sense on how each mechanism benefited, or in other instances deprived, mobilization processes and contention, comparing the findings between the cases.

### *1. The role of grievances and the formation of collective identities*

Grievances have always been a focal aspect of social movement studies (Simmons, 2014; Opp, 1988; Jasper, 2011). Throughout the analysis of the sources, grievances were often defined as an important factor explaining the emergence of collective action and the motivation of the masses to engage in contention. Lack of jobs, corruption, and human rights abuses, to name a few, were all motivations behind Tunisian's sense of revolt, demanding change, dignity, opportunities, and the overthrow of Ben Ali's regime (Global voices, 31 December 2010). For Egyptians, poor economic performance and lack of political freedoms, among other grievances, appeared to be the main motivation behind the uprising; "I dream to see my country free. Free from dictatorship, corruption, violence, and humiliation (Global voices, 6 February 2011). Similarly, in Libya, citizens revolted against Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship, criticizing socio-economic policies and their marginalization from the political realm. The society endured precarity and abuses, culminating in the distress of the population: "I wake up every morning thinking about Libya, I wake up every morning wishing things were different" (Global voices, 21 February 2011). It seems safe to say that among the three cases, the population suffered from unjust treatments, systematic abuses, lack of

freedoms, and poor living conditions. A systematic finding is the conveyance of grievances and discontent on social platforms. In this regard, the channeling of grievances into collective action greatly benefited from the digital realm whereas people could express themselves more freely and access numerous information items deriving from the official state narrative. Perhaps, the conveyance of grievances and the dissemination of dissent enabled the formation of collective identities around shared values and martyrs, strengthening a sense of revolt and the determination of protesters. For this, bloggers and activists played a crucial role in strategically framing instances, justifying the motivation behind dissent, and promoting participation in contention. For instance, in Tunisia, the death of Bouazizi was captured, collectivized, and framed as a symptom of broader issues: “What happened is not something new. This miserable situation has been ongoing in remote areas for years. It is the result of the combination of the climatic conditions and the marginalization of such areas, coupled with the total indifference of the authorities” (Global voices, 23 December 2010). Similar attempts were made in Libya after Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, son of Muammar, gave a televised speech asserting that grievances and protests for regime change didn’t exist. This was framed and perceived as an opportunity for Libyan protesters who, the 17<sup>th</sup> February 2011, took the streets of Tripoli. This event showed that the people of Libya had the capacities to defy the state order in numbers and location (Global voices, 17 January 2011). The murder of **Khaled Said**, a young student, by police authorities is considered a transformative event inciting contention in Egypt, creating connectivity and a new public sphere with potential for mobilization (Salvatore, 2011). Subsequently, a Facebook page called ‘We are all Khaled Said’, denouncing grievances and calling for revolt, was created and gained enormous support. The picture of Khaled’s corpse became viral on the platforms and had an outstanding reach and impact, becoming ‘the face that launched a revolution (Global Voices, 25 January 2011).

Properly, the dissemination of dissent through communication media is a phenomenon that occurred in the three cases. Showing widespread dissent appeared to provide rapid growth of opposition, appreciably through the formation of collective identities. In this regard, the conveyance of grievances allowed people to assess the extent to which they were shared, consequently re-evaluating the potential for mobilization. Massive dissemination of dissent through video sharing was noticed in the three cases. In Tunisia, protest began within hours of Bouazizi's self-immolation and spread across the country rapidly. Videos showing clashes and incidents on the ground, showing the horror of contention and the widespread of dissent, were instrumental in the formation of collective identities; “Mr. President, we are not afraid anymore [...] Tunisians are showing great solidarity” (Global voices, 13 January 2011). In Egypt, accordingly, dissemination of dissent appeared to play an important role, showing the potential for mobilization and reinforcing the hope of the people:

“there is no coming back; there is only death or victory [...] be part of the experience that might make your children and grandchildren proud of you” (Global voices, 6 February 2011). This quote shows the commitment of the protesters, but also their desperation in regards to the sufferance they have endured. In Libya, the analysis suggests a more fragmented revolutionary bloc, with the insurgency different independentist groups. Still, the broad aspirations were similar, and most importantly they fought against the same enemy: “Gaddafi is the enemy of God” (Global voices, 21 February 2011).

## *2. News technologies: A resource for mobilization*

The previous part showed how grievances benefited from news technologies by facilitating the dissemination of dissent and the formation of collective identities, expanding opportunities for collective action. This part will treat how communication media have been approached in terms of resources for the organization and sustaining of contention, supporting Weidmann & Rød's (2019) claim that ICTs facilitate the organization of social movement. In this sense, approaching news technologies as resources for mobilization makes sense as they offer the necessary tools and platforms for reinforcing mobilizing structures. Following the analysis, news technologies appeared to have two main functions, revealing themselves at different phases of contention.

The first function of news technologies suggests that they play an informational role. Needless to say, ICTs have rewired the relationship individual have with information by broadening its reach and maximizing its speed of diffusion (McGarty & al., 2014). This is particularly relevant in autocratic settings where the state closely monitors the flow of information. Indeed, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya share commonalities in respect to the openness of their media environment and levels of freedom of information. According to the Freedom of the Press Report (Freedom house, 2011), Egypt scored 65 on the freedom of the press index, ranking the country at 146th place worldwide. Tunisia scored 85 and is ranked 184th. Libya, which is considered to have one of the worst media environments in terms of openness and freedom, scores 94 and is ranked 191st. Clearly, the three countries score very badly and have a press that is not free. In this regard, the internet provided another space for the diffusion of information, a space where individuals can envisage new forms of political possibilities. In Libya for instance, people looked at blogs and other sources to outlook the regime propaganda: “it shows us another perspective [...] it makes us re-think about everything we heard or read” (Global voices, 17 January 2011). Developing the idea, in many instances, the internet seemed to fill the information gap produced by the scarce media environment. In Egypt, ICTs appeared to be instrumental in the diffusion of events which were overlooked by the state media. Particularly, cycles of news conveyance, where journalists would retweet content from activists and vice-versa, greatly contributed to the covering of events: “the continuous talks about the incident online were able to

attract attention to the phenomena, and hence proved the incident creditability” (Global voices, 21 August 2011). In Tunisia, where freedoms of expression were highly restrained, bloggers and activists also proved to enhance the diffusion of alternative framings to the government. Nonetheless, mobilization structures appeared to be more reliant on pre-existing ties, networks, and organizations, and less on the flow of information; “press coverage is important for recognition and support but doesn’t directly relate to what’s happening on the ground [...] what’s important is having strong allies” (Global voices, 26 February 2011). This view supports Meyer & Staggenborg's (1988) idea that the availability of elites allies is an important variable of expanding political opportunities.

The second function is an organizational one. Allowing people to learn and discuss, dissenter rapidly shifted their conversation on social media platforms, which appeared to be more immediate and interactive. In this sense, communication media can reinforce mobilizing structure in several ways. First, the informational function discussed above can enable better degrees of organization as information is more accessible and easily conveyable. In Egypt for example, the use of Facebook groups for the organization of protests and demonstrations was recurrent, attracting thousands of active members (Global voices, 25 January 2011). Similarly, in Libya the first demonstrations were organized and prepared online, notably through the Facebook group ‘Tonight is the night’, inviting people to protest on the streets (Global voices, 21 February 2011).

### *3. The state’s response*

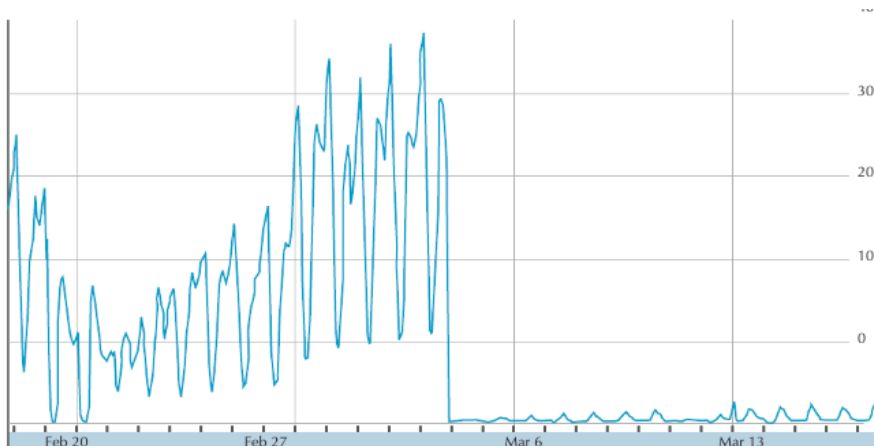
The previous part showed how protesters approached communication media as a resource for mobilization, providing possibilities and tools to organize collective action more effectively. Nevertheless, as a mean to starve dissenters and reduce their resources, governments attempt to control the flow of information. This was a commonality among the cases and references to freedom of information and censorship were an outstanding aspect throughout the analysis. In effect, the three countries score very poorly on the three criteria proposed by the freedom of the net report (Freedom, 2011). Obstacles to access, violations of users' rights, and limits of content are all factors preventing activists from organizing, but also significantly preventing the public from gauging the level of support of the cause (McGarty & al., 2014). On top of that, ICTs can happen to be tools of repression in the hands of authorities, notably through surveillance (Weidmann & Rød, 2019). Therefore, having these tools at disposition doesn’t necessarily imply empowerment of the citizens, rather it highly depends on the environment. In Libya, people were aware of the danger that implied freely expressing his opinions: “I advise him to delete his blog. He became too popular, it's dangerous” said a user about Khalid al Jorni, a blogger denouncing the terror of the regime. Accordingly, the former regime

enforced multiple media blackouts, but also cut the phone lines in parts of the country and jammed satellite stations of numerous outlets, with the scope of destabilizing the organization of contention (Global voices, 17 January 2011). In Egypt, the regime also proceeded with attempts at halting the flow of information, stressing the blockade of different social media platforms. Mubarak’s regime first shut down Twitter on January 25th, the day the protest started. The day after Facebook was blocked and two days later it was the all internet that was put to a halt. While these blockades aimed at containing contention, they appeared to create an outrage among the population: “Does #Mubarak think blocking #Facebook will block people's rage against him? #Jan25”; “Mubarak’s regime is blocking internet access to us. Keep spreading the word. We are being trapped #25jan” (Global voices, 25 January 2011). Huge hopes were put on the January 25th demonstration: “#Jan25 will change Egypt forever” (Global voices, 25 January 2011). The blocking of media platforms during these dates was no coincidence, it was merely the state trying to disrupt the organization of the protest, as well as the spread of information and content about it. Similarly, Libya banned the internet at times of high unrest and uncertainties. In this regard, figure 2 and figure 3 show the internet blackout that occurred in the two countries.

**Figure 2:** Egypt internet traffic between January 28<sup>th</sup> and February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011



**Figure 3:** Libya internet traffic after March 3<sup>rd</sup>



In Tunisia, media restrictiveness and censorship were a frequent subject of bitterness from activists: “To deprive a people, that was censored not for 23 years but for a half century, from talking and criticizing is pure anarchy [...] what kind of democracy do we want to build if we do not respect the other and censor those who break the wall of silence!” (Global voices, 31 October 2010). This however didn’t prevent activist from organizing protest and defying authority, using circumventing software to access censored content and sharing ways to bypass the restrictions to other activists (Global voices, 30 December 2010).

## Discussion

Overall, the analysis of the sources provided substantive insights on the variation of mobilization structures and outcomes according to differences in political opportunities and freedom of information among the three cases. While many studies focused on the topic of communication media during the Arab Spring, the relevancy of this study is twofold. First, the analysis of this type of source (forums discussions) permits to explore the emergence and course of contention encompassing both micro and macro levels, generating insights on the topic from individualistic experiences explaining broader implications, and, accordingly comparing patterns of mobilization in an attempt to reconstitute the causal pathway of this study. Furthermore, approaching a study of collective defiance from a political process theoretical framework, incorporating freedom of information and the media environment, as part of opportunities structures, offers a wider and more concise illustration of the events. Consistent with the results, I confirm the testing of three sub-hypotheses and a broad hypothesis.

Be that as it may, this research also faces different limitations. Namely, the strength of the analysis of such type of sources can also result in a weakness eroding the validity of the results. A critical issue being how and why certain ambitions and techniques resonated in local contexts, and not in others, is hardly generalizable when dealing with such types of data. In this regard, I would suggest for further research to counterbalance these limitations with the incorporation of more generalizable types of data items, while exploring individualistic experiences, in an attempt to reconstitute a more detailed and objective representations of the events.

## Conclusion

It is no mystery that the events of the Arab Spring have been pivotal for the MENA region, reshaping social structures and consolidating the hopes for a better future. This paper treated the effect of political opportunities, and more precisely of the media environment, on the emergence of mobilization in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Building a theoretical framework based on the tenets of the political process model, this research attempts to uncover the realities behind the uprisings, exploring the different mechanisms that lead to mobilization. While each uprising differed in terms of outcome, the causal pathway through which political opportunities influenced mobilization and collective action appeared to be coherent between the three cases. Indeed, the result of the analysis suggests that communication media did influence opportunity structures for mobilization. The findings suggest three main systems through which political opportunities were seized and collectivized by the masses, subsequently transmuting into collective action. In the first place, an association between communication media and the emergence of protest is presented on the basis that, through the conveyance of grievances and dissemination of dissent, collective identities are formed, consistently, opposing the narrative of the regime. Accordingly, the use of strategic framing promoted a call for change and participation in social movement, notably through the combination of grievances with political arguments. In this regard, the findings from this research support McGarty's (2014) idea that crowds achieve a common purpose and take action by forming collective identities around shared grievances. Furthermore, this study explored news technologies as a resource for the organization of contention, approaching communication media through a RMT framework. It has been found that news technology had two main functions during contention; information and organization. These two functions appeared instrumental in the organization of contention, providing activists with the instruments to organize contention. Therefore, the mobilization of news technologies as resources contributed to a more organized form of contention and the opening of doors, namely opportunities, for revolt. This coincides with Japsper's (2011) claim that confidence and interpretations of proper capacities become a mean for further action. Consistently, the state repressed insurgents in a variety of ways, attempting to starve the challenger and regain control over the nation. Protesters faced violent repression which often resulted in moral shock

Overall, this research presents an effort in uncovering an already widely aborted topic. What this paper brings to the literature is the application of the political process model, relative to freedom of information and the media environment, to the study of contention in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. As a closing statement, I would suggest that higher levels of freedom in the information environment did lead to more opportunities for collective participation in contentious politics, hence confirming the main hypotheses of this study. While communication technologies were not the reason behind the



uprisings, they played a preparatory role and transformed a rather passive connectedness into active mobilization (Salvatore, 2011).

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# Appendix.

## Coding Framework:

Dimensions	Sub-categories	Description	Code	Keywords/concepts to recognize categories
<b>Freedom of Information</b>	- Organizational production of news	- Conventional news	→ <b>FreOrg</b>	News outlet, newspaper, news broadcasting, social-media, freedom of expression, rights to information, journalism rights, news ownership...
	- Network production of news	- Independent news + ICT's	→ <b>FreNet</b>	
<b>Mobilization</b>	- Mobilization processes	- Mobilization efforts: organization of contention	→ <b>MobPro</b>	Mobilizing structures, organizational settings, coalition building, innovative tactics, leaders, groups, protests, march, demonstration...
	- Mobilization outcome	- Numbers, frequencies and statistics behind mobilization	→ <b>MobOut</b>	
<b>Repertoires of contention</b>	- Movement's repertoire	- Movement tactics and resources	→ <b>ConMov</b>	Strategies, resources, repression, conflict, capacities, target, killing, fight, deaths, injured, sequestered, imprisoned, violence Institutional response...
	- State repertoire	- State tactics and resources	→ <b>ConSta</b>	



<b>Grievances</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Causes of distress</li>   <li>- Levels of dissent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lacks and gaps the population is confronted to: motivations</li>   <li>- Level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction towards the central authority</li> </ul>	<p style="color: purple;">→ GriDis</p> <p style="color: purple;">→ GriCol</p>	<p>Injustice, precarity, authoritarianism, inequalities, discontent, collective defiance, anti-government, accountability, transparency, human rights, dissent...</p>
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