



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

**The Emergence of Libyan Networked Publics:
Social Media Use Before, During and After the Libyan
Uprising**

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

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Abstract

Much has been written about the role of social media in the Arab countries following the uprisings of 2011, most of it focused on Tunisia and Egypt. There has been very little research, however, that looks at the role of social media and its democratic potential within the Libyan context. Drawing on different understandings and critiques of the public sphere concept and how internet technology has transformed it, this qualitative study aimed to investigate the nature of the emergent Libyan networked public sphere, and traced how it has evolved over time. More specifically, this study focuses on three critical phases: immediately before, during, and after the uprising, covering primarily the period between 2011-2016, with a brief glance at Libya's public sphere in the pre-uprising period.

This study adopted an interpretative qualitative methodology, relying on multiple research techniques as part of a process of triangulation to provide a broader understanding of the research questions, and assure validity of claims and arguments. These qualitative methods were: (1) semi-structured Skype-based interviews with young Libyans with varying shades of political opinion aged between 25-35 years old in three cities, Tripoli, Benghazi and Sabha; and (2) qualitative content analysis of two selected Facebook pages, the revolutionary-oriented LW Facebook page, and the LI Facebook page, which was anti-revolutionary-oriented. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, while content analysis was used to analyse the Facebook data.

The study revealed that while social media may make it easier to mobilise populations, this does not mean it is easier to achieve gains or to sustain movements. The study revealed that the social media landscape that opened up suddenly after the uprising, revealing a vibrant political environment marked by different forms of political activities and practices, has devolved into an environment of conflict and chaos. The enthusiasm and hope for change has largely been replaced by frustration, distrust and fear in a way that has disempowered people and led many to stay passive recipients rather than active contributors in democratic debate and practice. The study also shows how Libya's pre-existing divisions might have exacerbated online polarization. More specifically, it illustrates how Libya's complex tribal composition, and its pre-existing regional cleavages, mainly the East-West divide, have been reanimated, and came to characterise the online practices and discussions of publics. This division along tribal and regional lines turned social media networks into spaces of contention and conflict, that led many to eventually abandon political participation. This

suggests that although there were some tentative signs of the development of a more democratic networked public sphere in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the deepening crisis and shrinking space for public debate indicate a complex, shifting and uncertain picture of the role of social media in the development of Libya's post-uprising public sphere.

Because social media landscape in Libya has continued to change and evolve since 2011, this study recommends that to understand the nature of emergent networked publics in post-revolutionary societies, the theoretical framework ought to be longitudinal because countries in transition are often experiencing fast-paced changes in a way that makes it problematic to generalise from a snapshot moment. This study also recommends that recognising and adapting to these changes needs to be at the heart of any social media strategy for Libya for some time to come.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and significance

There have been many debates about the role of social media during the so-called ‘Arab Spring revolutions’ in late 2010 and early 2011 (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Castells, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013). Social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been given much credit for playing a crucial role in shifting the balance of power from states to the people in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. News headlines and catchphrases such as “Twitter Revolution” or “Facebook Revolution” have been used to refer to the Arab Spring protests and subsequent ousting of the regimes. Yet, a more nuanced examination of the 2011 uprisings reveals that, while social media helped partly to promote the uprisings, there was an array of causes and complex factors for these changes (Salem & Mourtada, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Morozov, 2011; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Della Porta, 2015). In Libya, for example, the role that social media played might have been different from the neighbouring countries, as internet access was still limited and the degree of social media use was still in development. Because there is little research – if any – on the Libyan context, this study comes to fill the gap in knowledge and contribute to the global debate about social media, providing an exploratory qualitative piece of research that explores Libya’s digital experience during that watershed year, as well as the following transitional years.

Historically the introduction of internet and social media networks have been noted for their role in stimulating political activism and changing the landscape of political communication (Norris, P., & Jones, 1998; Shirky, 2011). For some commentators, the widespread adoption of the internet and social media has empowered publics to become new agents in social movements (Grindstaff, 2007). Technology enables the public to communicate faster and more easily, gain greater access to information, and get more opportunities to engage in the public sphere (Shirky, 2011; Lynch, 2011). Several examples point to information and communication technologies as important tools for supporting political participation and social change. The Zapatista movement in Mexico is a significant example of the successful use of the internet for political ends (Russell, 2011). In the mid-1990s, it was Zapatista rebels who pioneered the use of internet technology to achieve their political goal, demanding their indigenous land rights (Ronfeldt, Arquilla, Fuller, & Fuller, 1998; Hussain & Howard, 2013; Russell, 2011). The Zapatistas’ use of the internet to

convey information related to their movement tactics was described by Turner (2005) as the world's "first informational guerrilla movement", differentiating this new type of social revolutionary movement from traditional Latin American revolutionary struggles. This new revolutionary type in which technology was employed has significantly widened the Zapatistas' international support network and advanced the movement's struggle.

Information technology continues to be used by many contemporary social struggles. The 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999 is another example of the use of internet for recruiting people, coordinating actions and gaining international support (Juris, 2005; Pickard, 2006). Thousands of protesters gathered in Seattle, United States, against the World Trade Organization (WTO). The protests, which lasted for five days, began peacefully but turned into violent events. Indymedia, internet-based activism, flourished allowing activists in the United States as well as those at a distance to collaboratively organize actions, distribute information, and relate stories and experiences regarding WTO demonstrations. The internet was used heavily to produce reports documenting the police brutality and abuse towards protesters. The Indymedia website provided grassroots coverage of the World Trade Organization protests to bring global attention to them.

Likewise, global attention was also gained through technology during the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001. Activists used the internet to organize movements on a global scale (Pickard, 2006). The internet facilitated a horizontal networking logic among activists. Through electronic listservs, forums, blogs and websites, activists around the world were able to participate, collaborate and circulate information. This way of communicating was pioneering and described by Juris (2005) as a "new way of doing politics" (p. 198) because it crafted a new culture of practising politics and created new political values.

However, although the examples discussed above indicate that technology has changed the dynamics of social movements and reshaped the nature of practising politics, the successful use of the internet for political change is complex. Debate about the role of digital media in political change has grown in importance in the light of the recent 2010/2011 uprisings that swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); see, for example, Howard & Hussain (2011); Khamis & Vaughn (2011); Lynch, 2011; Morozov (2011); Shirky (2011); Tufekci & Wilson (2012); and Castells (2012). Two discrete positions emerged from this debate: the "cyber-optimists" (Shirky, 2011) and the "cyber-sceptics" (Morozov, 2011). The cyber-optimists view the internet and social media as potentially powerful in enabling people

living in nondemocratic societies, and allowing revolutionaries to adopt new strategies (Shirky, 2011). In contrast, the cyber-pessimists downplay the claim that digital media has a political power, arguing that technology does not always support democracy. Rather, it could be a tool for repression and control (Morozov, 2011). Likewise, Malcom Gladwell (2010), in his *New Yorker* article, ‘*The revolution will not be tweeted*’, further criticised the role of technology in relation to collective actions. Gladwell's claim rests on two main points: firstly, social media is built around ‘weak tie’ relations between people, whereas high-risk activism is driven by ‘strong ties’. Secondly, digital networks inherently lack the hierarchical logic that he deems crucial to the success of any collective action.

Beyond black and white, academic scholars have more recently attempted to study the relationship between technology and collective actions in more complex ways. Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer (2013), for example, believe that there is a relationship between the political environment and the impact of digital media on the success of social movements. To better understand the role of social media in collective action, they argued that one should take into account the various political environments and how these technologies resonate in their local contexts. This line of thinking to understand the complex relationship between digital technologies and modern protests was also embraced by Zayani (2015). In his book *Networked Publics and Digital Contention*, Zayani moves to ask the question of how, rather than whether, activists use social media networks for political expression in Tunisia. Zayani believes that although some scholars (e.g. Lynch, 2006) argue that the increase use of digital media in the Arab region over the 2000s has created an online space of interaction that is akin to the Habermasian public sphere—an inclusive space of interaction centred on rational-critical discussion (Habermas, 1989), efforts to theorise the political implications of digital media in non-democratic contexts are challenging because they are embedded in the normative functions of media in democratic politics. To understand the Tunisian experience, Zayani linked between the changes in Tunisian society and the political implications of media by drawing attention to a multifaceted and rich culture that is woven into everyday digital experiences in the country.

More recently, Tufekci (2017), in her book, *The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, uses the concept of the “networked public sphere” for comprehending the complex online and offline interaction of publics in contemporary protest events, rather than returning to Habermas’s ideal concept of the rational public sphere. From her perspective, although digital networks have the power to focus people’s attention on certain topics, and thus

challenge the control of traditional elites over the flow of information, they are not necessarily conducive to a functional public sphere or a successful movement due to issues such as credibility, hate speech and polarisation (Tufekci, 2017). As an activist who participated in a number of protests (e.g. Istanbul's Gezi Park protesters in 2013), Tufekci believes that this historical transformation in digital connectivity is complex, and that perhaps the best approach to understand it is to identify trends and describe dynamics introduced by these new media technologies and how they intertwine with political, social, and cultural forces.

While much has been written on the role of digital networks in the Arab uprisings, mainly focusing upon Egypt and Tunisia, relatively little is known about the extent to which these networks played a role in the Libyan revolution and its aftermath. There has also been little attention paid to how the role of digital networks varies over time and circumstances. For example, in relation to the days of the Libyan uprising, Libya had very low internet penetration compared to the neighbouring countries Tunisia and Egypt (Salem & Mourtada, 2011). After the revolution, however, the country experienced an explosive growth in social media use. Social media reaches a far greater audience than it ever did at the time of the 2011 uprising, particularly among youth, driven by the growth of smartphones (Schäfer, 2015; Freedom House, 2015). According to Internet World Stats (2017), the number of Facebook users in Libya reached around 3.5 million in 2017 (just over half of the country's population), up from 260,400 in 2010 (Salem & Mourtada, 2011)¹.

This rapid growth is certainly worth exploring as it could potentially form the basis for a nascent democratic networked public sphere. Yet, due to the country's complex situation that is rife with political conflicts, Libya has fallen into chaos resulting in violence and threats specifically against activists and bloggers (Freedom House, 2015). These unexplored dynamics are worth studying. Our assumptions and understanding of how publics experienced and used social media during this period of change requires deep investigation. Central to this in-depth investigation is the consideration of digital technology use in the years leading up to the revolution. Calling for some historical depth helps to better understand multiple dimensions and various dynamics of the digital turn in Libya. According to Axford (2011), "the affordances supplied by communication

¹ It could be difficult to confirm the actual number of users due to the unstable situation that could lead users to have more than one Facebook account.

technologies in general and participatory media in particular impact differently in countries with diverse histories, constitutions, political cultures, and policies towards freedom of expression” (p. 683). This thesis, therefore, attempts not only to focus on a single period of time, but aims to advance our understanding of the nature of the emergent networked public sphere in Libya during three critical phases: immediately before, during, and after the uprising. Studying specific contexts is valuable in order to move beyond a pervasive tendency to consider the complex Arab digital experience as homogenous (Zayani, 2015). Highlighting the specificity of certain contexts or experiences allows us to create the basis for a desirable comparative theorisation of digital practices and experiences.

1.2 Research aim and research questions

Based on the research context presented above, the present study aims to answer the following main research question: *What is the nature of the emergent Libyan networked public sphere, and how has it evolved over three complex phases, before, during and after the uprising.* The study covers primarily the period between 2011-2016, with a brief glance at Libya’s public sphere in the pre-uprising period.

In order to answer the main research question, the following sub-questions are posed:

1. To what extent did social media play a role in facilitating political change and creating a space for political discourse in the governmental-controlled public sphere during the Libyan uprising?
2. To what extent has social media facilitated the emergence of a networked public sphere in Libya’s post-uprising period: has it helped foster a more democratic environment?

In order to achieve the research aim and answer the research questions, five objectives are established:

1. To develop a thorough understanding of the relationship between internet technology and public participation in politics, particularly in the MENA region, through undertaking a literature review of the academic material.
2. To explore debates about the concept of the public sphere and consider how such an idea may need to be adapted to make it suitable to apply to the Libyan context.

3. To find out how the use of internet and social media by Libyans for political purposes has evolved over time and circumstances, through conducting in-depth interviews with young Libyan citizens.
4. To gain insights on young Libyans' actual use of social media for political purposes, and how this has developed over time through conducting content analysis of a sample of public Facebook pages.
5. To interpret these developments and practices within the existing body of knowledge in relation to the democratic potential of internet and its related-technologies.

1.3 Personal encounter with the uprising and its aftermath

In this research, the researcher acknowledges herself as part of the environment rather than detached. When Libyans chanted "*the people demand the fall of the regime*" in February 2011, nobody would have expected that Libyans, who had lived under Muammar Al-Gaddafi's control for forty-two years, would be capable of raising their voice and overthrowing the regime. While revolutionaries had succeeded in removing the regime, the country since then has engulfed in war, where militias, some backed by foreign powers, have replaced the central state and Islamic State put down its roots in Libya. As a Libyan female who lived through these fast-moving and violent events unfolded since 2011, the experience was and is still intense and emotional, creating a desire and motivation to conduct this research. Native knowledge of the Libyan culture and language give the researcher a more nuanced perspective on a complex mix of political, economic and social issues in a country that is currently in the throes of change. In qualitative studies, researchers are encouraged to be aware of their own biases and assumptions, rather than acting as if they can be eliminated. Following the criteria proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1986), *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*, the researcher remained reflexive throughout this project in pursuit of a trustworthy study (see Section 4.8).

1.4 Thesis structure

The thesis is organised into eight chapters as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction. This chapter introduces the general concept of this research, discussing its significance and justification. In addition, it states the research aim and questions, followed by the appropriate objectives to satisfy them.

Chapter 2: Literature review. This chapter provides a critical review of the existing literature in relation to the use of internet and social media in the MENA uprisings, with a particular focus on the Libyan case.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework. This chapter provides a theoretical discussion of different conceptualisations concerning the internet and its relation to the public sphere and democracy. The discussion starts with Habermas' (1989) notion of the normative public sphere, giving a historical account of the development of the concept and discussing different conceptualisations and debates surrounding it. The chapter then moves to discuss how the internet and its related technologies have transformed the public sphere concept, exploring the promises and limits of these technologies.

Chapter 4: Research design and methodology. This chapter presents the methodology of this study, by justifying the significance of the qualitative approach and the choice of each method used: semi-structured interviews and content analysis. The chapter then reflects on ethical and other challenges encountered throughout the study, before discussing criteria used to evaluate the quality of the research.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7: The study findings. Chapter five analyses the interview findings in relation to two phases: the pre-uprising period and at the time of the uprising. In this chapter, young people's experiences and social media practices are presented. Chapter six continues the analysis of interviews. It deals mainly with presenting findings on themes related to post-revolutionary Libya, showing how young people's social media use and experiences vary over time and circumstances. Chapter seven presents findings from content analysis of two selected Facebook pages, revolutionary and anti-revolutionary, exploring the nature of the discussion and how this shifted over time.

Chapter 8: Discussion. This chapter consolidates and interprets the findings presented in the above chapters in the light of the literature review and the theoretical framework. This chapter is organised into two main sections: the first section focuses on technology usage

and young people's lived experiences during the uprising and time leading up to it. It discusses how digitally savvy young people revolted in a repressed environment, and how they scaled up from Facebook online calls for actions to a bloody revolution. The second section focuses on their technology use and experiences after the uprising, discussing the limits and opportunities of technology in promoting a nascent public sphere in Libya. Each section starts with a summary of the key findings.

Chapter 9: Conclusion. This final chapter re-visits the study research questions and how they have been answered. It presents how the study contributes to knowledge, theoretically, methodologically and practically. The chapter concludes with recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical review of how the internet and social media networks have altered the dynamics of social movements and created new possibilities for political change. It does so by discussing the role of these technologies in the context of the recent uprisings that swept the MENA region. The review first discusses the literature on the Iranian Green Movement before discussing the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, highlighting the role played by technology and how it resonates in each context. Special attention is paid to the Libyan case.

2.2 Search strategy

In order to find high quality and relevant references, The University of Sheffield's Primo Central search engine was used to locate literature, which incorporates a wide range of journal articles and databases, including Scopus, ProQuest, Springer Link, and Web of Science. Google Scholar's search engine was also employed, as well as citation analysis of journal articles (i.e., following up references in bibliographies). Search terms were also entered into Google. Since the impact of internet and social media on political change has received substantial research attention, the initial search revealed a large volume of literature covering various countries. While literature regarding key cases from other countries was collected from these initial searches to give context e.g. Mexico, Seattle etc., the researcher then performed a structured literature review mainly in relation to the MENA region, in order to keep the literature focused and specific.

The search strategy involved multiple combinations of search terms and Boolean operators among keywords linked to the use of social media for political communication during the so-called "Arab Spring", where social media is assumed to be the ignition spark for uprisings. Sets of keywords for the literature search were developed, which later were evaluated and revised several times. Key words searched were:

("Social Media" OR "social network" OR "new media" Or "digital media" OR "Facebook" OR "Twitter" OR "YouTube")

AND

("Arab revolutions" OR "Arab Spring" OR "Tunisia" OR "Egypt" OR "Libya" OR "Tahrir Square" OR "Jasmine revolution" OR "17 February Revolution" OR "2011 protests")

By using the keywords “social media” and “social networks”, it was ensured that different social media platforms were taken into account. The inclusion of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya ensured that no articles were missing related to the events of the “Arab Spring”.

With a main emphasis on MENA region, a wide range of items were obtained (e.g. Journal articles, eBooks, reports, conference proceedings). As a basis for their theoretical framework, the authors of these items often refer to the concept of the public sphere, where political communication unfolds new forms of expression, diverse and pluralised narratives (e.g. Lynch, 2006; Lynch, 2011; Shirky, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Papacharissi & De Fatima Oliveira, 2012). This led to develop further sets of keywords around the concepts of “democratization”, “public sphere”, “networked publics”, “digital publics”, “affective publics”, “networked society”, “political transformation” and “social change” for further literature search in order to establish a theoretical framework for this study (see Chapter 2). Given the up-to-date nature of the topic, it was important to continually monitor sources over the course of study for new relevant material.

2.3 The use of internet and social media for political change in the MENA region

Based on the search findings, it can be stated that there is a considerable amount of literature dealing with the revolutions in the MENA region. Despite the multiple opportunities of social media for political communication and interaction (Lotan et al., 2011), the literature suggests that political usage of social media does not automatically lead to political change, although it offers a “leaderless” way of communication (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012). Neither the so-called “Twitter Revolution” in Iran in 2009 was successful (Howard, 2010; Morozov, 2011a), nor can the direction of the social change in the Arab countries be predicted yet (Zayani, 2015). Studies also suggest that these uprisings were a specific response to a form of capitalism in the region rather than movements for democracy as often portrayed (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Della Porta, 2015). A more detailed account of this is given in the following sections while investigating the use of social media during the MENA uprisings, with a special focus on the Libyan revolution that to date has received very little attention.

2.3.1 Iranian Green Movement: a “Twitter revolution”?

In 2009, Iran experienced massive protests after the day of election, June 15, when it was officially announced that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won amidst allegations of the

election being rigged. Many Iranians who doubted the outcome of the election joined the street protests that spread across the country (Howard, 2010; Shirky, 2011). Much discussion has broken out over the degree to which the internet and social media facilitated the Iran protests. According to many commentators (e.g. Howard, 2010; Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, & Freelon, 2012), digital media technology played an important role during the Iranian events. Protesters were able to use digital media to organize and record the protests, and to exchange online content locally between one another and internationally to gain support from the international community. The internet was flooded by hostile images and videos taken from the street.

The Iranian opposition as well as tech-savvy members of the international community provided Iran-based users with tools of secure communication such as proxy servers and encryption software, allowing them to bypass the government censorship (Wojcieszak & Smith, 2014). In addition, volunteers from around the world campaigned to launch cyber-attacks against the government's website, disabling its services and thwarting their ability to spread misinformation and propaganda. The U.S State Department also intervened to stop a temporary shutdown of Twitter because the company planned to undertake maintenance work for its service during the time of protests. A request was made by the Obama administration asking Twitter to remain open in order to keep the protesters recording and sharing their experiences. Moreover, big companies such as Facebook and Google launched Farsi translation support tools to facilitate communication between Iranians and the world, and vice versa, in a way that increased and eased access to information (Howard, 2010).

Yet, many scholars (e.g. Schectman, 2009; Morozov, 2011a; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) believe that it is unlikely that technology, particularly Twitter itself, played a major role in those events. In their opinion, the role of Twitter in the Iranian revolution is overestimated. They also doubt the validity of claims that consider the Iran protests as a "Twitter Revolution". Morozov (2011a), for example, stated that the cyber-attacks launched by international volunteers against the government slowed down the internet in Iran, making it difficult for the public inside the country to upload photos and share information. The Iranian government blocked foreign news sites and turned off internet service for short periods; they struck back at the protesters, using high-tech surveillance and censorship programs. As a result, many people who were involved in the protests were identified and arrested.

New internet regulations and rules were proposed, imposing more restrictions and limitations on Iranians (Morozov, 2011a; Aday et al., 2012; Yli-Kaitala, 2014).

Furthermore, statistics also show that Twitter was not a popular platform in Iran during the protests. In 2009, a minority of less than 9000 users were registered with Twitter in Iran, out of a total population of seventy million (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Howard (2010) also expressed uncertainty regarding the significance of Twitter on the Iran protests. He stated that although Twitter was an important communications tool for protesters, an unknown number of the new Twitter accounts were created by outside supporters who claimed to be in Iran. There were also local users who identified themselves as being abroad to avoid government surveillance. This suggests that the significant role claimed for Twitter during the Iran protests seems to be largely overstated, and all the above discussed issues must be taken into account when evaluating the impact of Twitter on the Iran protests.

2.3.2 Tunisian uprising (the ‘Jasmine revolution’)

Tunisia was the first country to be linked to the internet in the Arab world, in 1991. Since internet technology became available to the public in the mid-1990s, the Tunisian government have applied an extensive censorship program to block websites that include opposition political content (Howard, 2010; Lim, 2013). However, this firm control over the internet has not stopped activists from engaging with politics. The Tunisian blogosphere was, to some extent, politically active a long time before the outbreak of the ‘Jasmine revolution’. According to Sami Ben Gharbia, a Tunisian blogger activist, “The role of the internet in the Tunisian revolution and [in] building the spirit of protest and change is the work of at least a decade” (Randeree, 2011). Before the revolution, many bloggers engaged in digital activism against the government censorship, defending human rights and freedom of expression. In 2004, for example, a group of human rights activists established an independent blog called *Nawaat.org*. This blog turned out to be a key platform for political opposition. This site, however, was frequently blocked by the Tunisian authorities. However, this was not the only anti-regime blog. Another example of active and influential blog was *Tunisian Girl*, which was established by Lina Ben Mhenni, a Tunisian activist. Ben Mhenni used her blog to challenge and write against the Ben Ali regime. She was one of a few bloggers who wrote blog posts under her real identity (Salanova, 2012).

In December 2010, when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after being harassed by a police officer, many people gathered and took to the streets in massive demonstrations

against the state. The internet and its related technology was flooded with images and political news (Lotan et al., 2011). Many communication tools such as cell phones and video cameras were used to record events and share news stories online (Howard & Hussain, 2011). Ben Mhenni, with other Tunisian bloggers and activists, played an important role in calling for and organising further anti-regime protests. Through blogs such as *Nawaat.org* and *Tunisian Girl*, they contributed to the flow of information about the protests and challenged the state censorship (Lim, 2013). These blogs later became a source of information and news for regional as well as international media outlets. Traditional media outlets such as Al Jazeera made a significant contribution in publicising these events, giving more visibility to the protests both locally and globally (Gladwell, 2011).

In Tunisia's history, the 2010 protests were not the first movement against the regime. The country had experienced large protests in 2009 in Gafsa city (Lim, 2013). Although the Gafsa protests lasted for around six months, they did not spread elsewhere in Tunisia as the 2011 protests did. The government banned journalists from entering the city, resulting in a scarcity of information and reports about the events. Online coverage was also limited. Unlike the 2010 protests, only a few videos related to the protests were circulated on social media (e.g. YouTube and Facebook), making the protests hard to be recognized by local and international media. This limited online coverage, according to Tufekci (2017), could potentially be due to the small number of social media users. At the time of the Gafsa protests, for example, the number of Facebook users in Tunisia was only 28,000. By the end of 2010, however, the number of users on Facebook had exploded to 2 million.

However, although it might be true that internet technology played a key role in triggering and facilitating the Tunisian revolution, "it would be a mistake to tie any theory of social change to a particular piece of software" (Howard, 2010, p. 11). York (2011), for example, viewed the revolution as a 'people's revolution' which would have occurred with or without digital media. Gladwell (2011) argues that "people with a grievance will always find ways to communicate with each other". History abounds with examples of successful revolutions which occurred before social media became available, such as "[b]ooks and newspapers in the abolitionist movement; the telegraph in the 1917 Bolshevik revolution; the independent radio in the first People Power in the Philippines in 1984; Xerox copies of information first circulated on the web in the 1998 anti-Suharto movement in Indonesia" (Lim, 2013, p.

922). Therefore, one should be careful when evaluating the role of social media in relation to the contemporary movements.

Yet, the idea of the ‘people’s revolution’ as discussed above was doubted and questioned. While some scholars think that the Arab Spring revolutions were spontaneous, popular and leaderless events (Landolt & Kubicek, 2013; Lotan et al., 2011), others believe that the Western countries, particularly the US, had interfered in these events through training many activists who later became key leaders of the Arab uprisings (Gana, 2013; Cavanaugh, 2016). This training involved strategies and tactics on how to handle and manage protests using the internet and social media. The U.S interest and influence in political actions is not something new. Serbian activists of the Otpor! movement were also trained in using the internet by the Americans to overthrow Slobodan Milošević in 2000, and were themselves involved in training Arab activists (Gana, 2013; Cavanaugh, 2016). In Antonio Gramsci’s perspective, “collective action is never completely spontaneous given that pure spontaneity does not exist” (cited in Gerbaudo, 2012, p.21).

2.3.3 Egyptian uprising (the January 25 Revolution)

Following the ousting of the Ben Ali regime, Egyptians were influenced and highly motivated to achieve their goal of bringing the Hosni Mubarak regime to an end. As in Tunisia, the internet emerged as an integral element of political change in Egypt. The number of internet users in Egypt reached more than 23 million users by the end of 2010, out of the total population of 84.11 million. Around 10.7 million of those internet users (the 23 million) accessed the internet through their mobile phones (Kassem, 2013). Cell phone penetration was high in Egypt, reaching more than 80% in 2010 (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). This high number of internet users in Egypt, together with the growing use of mobile devices, enabled people to interact and communicate with each other during the Egyptian protests (Howard & Hussain, 2011).

The call for protests on January 25, 2011 was launched through a Facebook page called “*We are All Khaled Said*”. This page was set up by Wael Ghonim, an internet activist, in response to Khaled Said’s death. Said, a blogger activist, who was believed to have posted a video clip online showing police officers engaging in an illegal drug deal, was beaten to death, leaving his corpse on the street in June 2010 (Hussain & Howard, 2013). Said’s horrific photo in the morgue, with a photo of a healthy Said, was posted by Wael Ghonim online. These photos provoked outrage in the Egyptian streets and attracted more than

350,000 members to the Facebook page before January 14th 2010. This page became a platform for Egyptians to discuss topics regarding police officers' illegal practices as well as government corruption, paving the way for people to come together to protest against the government in 2011 (Khondker, 2011). Based on a survey of participants in Egypt's Tahrir Square protests, Tufekci & Wilson (2012) demonstrated that social media in general, and Facebook in particular, was a source of information on the protests the regime could not easily control and were crucial in shaping how citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests.

During the events, digital media was used heavily to share revolutionary information and to document protests either by individuals or organizations. For example, Nawara Negm, a female activist, used her blog to post solidarity messages to encourage people protesting against Mubarak's regime. Moreover, members of the April 6th youth movement, an Egyptian activist group, relied extensively on different types of social media platforms to organize and coordinate demonstrations. Like Tunisian activists, the April 6th movement members were also inspired by Otpor!, the Serbian youth movement, for whom the internet was an important tool in their protests against the government. In Serbia, before the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution, the April 6th leaders met their peers from Otpor! in order to learn from their experience in ending Slobodan Milošević's dictatorship (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

While activists and protestors in Egypt were tweeting, sharing, documenting, and videoing the protests (Lotan et al., 2011), the regime in turn attempted to shut down the internet to interrupt the flow of information from Tahrir Square, the focal point of the protests (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). However, despite the internet cut-off which lasted approximately one week, the flow of information did not completely stop. Citizens continued to share information and document events from the ground. In fact, a special feature established by Twitter and Google called "*Speak to Tweet*" allowed protestors to overcome the internet blackout. This services enabled Egyptians to send tweets by simply leaving a voicemail on certain phone numbers that was then automatically sent out as a tweet (Kassem, 2013). Moreover, during the Egyptian revolution, the government became more concerned about the impact of TV channels such as Al Jazeera on information dissemination. In the light of this, the government went on to shut down Al Jazeera channel bureaus and impound its reporters' equipment (Miles, 2011). However, despite all the regime's attempts to shut down information and communication channels, the protests had already been triggered.

According to Khamis & Vaughn (2011) the regime's strategy of shutting down the internet seemed to empower activists and the public to take the streets to protest against the government.

Young people in Egypt suffered for a long time from inequality, a growing disparity between the rich and poor, low wages, censorship, repression and corruption (Howard, 2010; Fuchs, 2012). According to Della Porta (2015), the Arab Spring targeted not only the region's repressive regimes but its growing poverty as well as the social and geographical inequalities introduced by various waves of neo-liberal reforms that had cut public services and subsidies and created high unemployment, especially among the young. Christensen (2013) describes these politico-economic conditions or what he called '*meta-events*' provided a fertile ground for youth to protest against the regime.

However, Hussain & Howard (2013) described the people who participated in Tahrir protests as 'unusual', meaning that not only people with a sense of grievance joined the protests, but also people with a high level of education and social class. According to Musolf (2003), "[a]gency was always there in emerging collective definitions of the situation and actions of resistance, arising and overthrowing structures of oppression. No matter what breakwaters we build to structure out social change, the time and tide of human agency may disrupt all" (p. 8).

2.4 Libyan uprising (17 February Revolution)

“My name is freedom; born in Tunisia, raised in Egypt, studied in Yemen, fought in Libya and I’ll grow up in all the Arab world”

A tweet by @alitweel, a Libyan blogger (22 February 2011)²

2.4.1 Background information on Libya

Libya is one of the Arab Spring countries which geographically lie on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. The country’s population is approximately six and a half million people that are largely Arab but with a minority of Berber, Tebu, Greek, Turkish, Italian and Sephardi Jewish³. Sunni Islam is the dominant religion in Libya (Bearman, 1986). The social structure of the Libyan society is based on the forms of tribes, clans, and families. In fact, there are around 140 main tribes forming Libyan society (Bell & Witter, 2011). Due to the small size of the Libyan population and the tribal nature of the society, Libyan society has remained remarkably homogeneous, involving strong and profound relationships with people who live either inside or outside the country (Scott-Railton, 2011).

Libya historically was divided into three provinces: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan (see figure 2.1 below). These three provinces were surrendered to Italy by Ottomans in 1912 after the Italians launched a military invasion of Libya in 1911. Italy’s concern with overpopulation influenced their colonialism; they referred to Libya as "The Fourth Shore" to promote Italian settlement there. However, the Libyans resisted across the country. Umar al Mukhtar عمر المختار, a national hero, was the leader of resistance that lasted many years against the Italian colonization before his capture and execution in 1931. After World War II, Italy’s defeat seemed to create an opportunity for Libyans to gain independence. Libyans showed their support to the British (Britain was against Italy during the war) through Idris Senussi, the headquarters of the Senussi movement based in Cyrenaica (a Muslim political-religious tariqa ‘Sufi order’). Idris was recognized by the British, who supported the move towards independence. In 1951, Libya declared its independence as the Kingdom of Libya. Following its independence, the three provinces enjoyed federal rule, until the country converted to a unitary system in 1963. King Idris Senussi ruled Libya for around 17 years

² Informed consent received from @alitweel for the reproduction of his tweet

³ Libya's Jewish population was subjected to anti-Semitic laws by the Fascist Italian regime and deportations by German troops during World War II.

before Muammar Al-Gaddafi came to power in 1969 after leading a bloodless military coup against the British-backed King Idris (Bearman, 1986; Bell & Witter, 2011).

Figure 2.1 Map of the traditional provinces of Libya



During Al-Gaddafi’s rule, the country’s political and economic power was to some extent shifted away from Cyrenaica to Tripolitania, where Gaddafi “built his base of support among the tribes and elite of Tripolitania and Fezzan that had been neglected under the Sanusi” (Bell & Witter, 2011, p. 16). Politically, Al-Gaddafi did not rely on existing forms of political systems. Rather, he set out his own system of government based on his personal political philosophy that he outlined in his Green Book in 1975⁴, the Third Universal Theory. The system was a “combination of socialism and Islam derived in part from tribal practices and was supposed to be implemented by the Libyan people themselves in a unique

⁴ The Green Book (Arabic: الكتاب الأخضر al-Kitāb al-Aḥḍar) is a short book setting out the political philosophy of Libyan leader Muammar Al-Gaddafi.

form of “direct democracy” (Margo, Bonning, & Neighbor, 2012, p. 8). In 1977, Al-Gaddafi declared the Libyan Jamahiriya (the state of the masses). In theory, it “empowered ordinary citizens through local ‘people’s committees’” to allow for direct political participation but in practice, however, “it centralised much of Libya’s decision-making in the hands of a few select officials” (Al Jazeera English, 2012). Within this system, political parties and political activism were forbidden, ‘unsound’ publications were banned, and the rights of freedom of speech and assembly were repressed and restricted (Bell & Witter, 2011).

In 1999, Libya emerged from around a decade of economic sanctions placed by the UN Security Council, resulting in a period of economic hardship. This economic isolation was due to the involvement of the regime’s intelligence service in bombing Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. Following the removal of the international sanctions, Libya gradually moved to make reforms within the state, as a part of improving its international relations. Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the second oldest son, emerged as his father’s likely heir, presenting himself as a defender of human rights and media freedom through his project ‘Libya Al-Ghad’ (Libya tomorrow). Within this project, he made efforts to reconcile with the regime’s opponents, release political prisoners and propose a constitution (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012).

Saif al-Islam also made efforts to open and liberalize Libya’s economy, particularly the oil sector, attracting foreign investment and encouraging the private sector. Libya’s potential was huge. In 2010 alone, annual oil revenues reached 44 billion dollars. Yet, this wealth derived from oil did not seem to improve the country’s economic condition; Libya still relied heavily on imports for food and other main commodities. Such economic conditions seemed to contribute to increasing the unemployment rate, which was reported to exceed 25 percent, although this statistic could be misleading as some Libyans work outside the formal employment structure (Bell, Anthony & Witter, 2011).

Within his reformist schemes, Saif al-Islam also established a main TV channel (al-Libiyya), two newspapers (Oea and Quryna) and a news agency (Libya Press), aiming for an independent media that imposed fewer restrictions on public speech, and thus, allowed for a freer flow of information. However, in a 2007 speech, which was given to a crowd of youth, Saif identified four “red lines” that could not be crossed: “Islamism, the security and stability of Libya, Libya’s territorial integrity and finally, Muammar Gaddafi himself”

(Issawi, 2013, p. 20). All other issues were no longer immune to criticism. Despite these steps towards relative reform, the regime, however, did not seem to attempt to overhaul the system. In fact, “Al-Ghad was nationalised in 2009 and Saif al-Islam relatively side-lined” (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012, p. 62). The country remained under the control of Muammar Al-Gaddafi for 42 years until the regime was brought down in 2011.

2.4.2 The Libyan media landscape before the uprising

To give an overview of the Libyan media landscape before the uprising, it is important to provide a background on both **1)** old media such as TV stations, newspapers and their respective owners and/or ideological affiliations. **2)** internet connectivity and new media.

2.4.2.1 The old media landscape

Libyan media is known for a long-standing tradition of heavy-handed state intervention. Gaddafi’s Green Book, which setting out his political philosophy, explained that “the press is a means of expression of society and is not a means of expression of a natural or a corporate person. Logically and democratically, the press, therefore, cannot be owned by either of these” (Gaddafi, 1975, p. 35). All public organizations, including the media and press, were linked to and tightly controlled by the regime (Issawi, 2013), and journalists worked in a climate of fear and self-censorship (Freedom House, 2010). Put differently, state media and press had no real political function other than to publish information provided by the regime. Even with the efforts of Saif al-Islam to open and liberalize media through his project, Libya Al-Ghad, which involved the establishment of a television channel (al-Libiyya TV), two newspapers (Oea and Quryna), and a news agency (Libya Press), there was a limited degree of freedom to be found within this structure (Issawi, 2013). Despite this, however, the introduction of satellite TV stations (e.g. Al-Jazeera), and to a lesser degree the spread of internet connectivity in the 1990s allowed many Libyans access to a wide spectrum of uncensored news prior to 2011 (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012).

2.4.2.1 Internet connectivity and new media landscape

Internet was first introduced in Libya in 1998 and became available to the public in 2000 (Freedom House, 2015). The number of new users increased steadily between 2000 and 2009. According to Scott-Railton (2011), the total number of internet users reached around 350,000 in 2010. Of these, 260,400 were Facebook users; most were male at 70% while females made up 30%. Young people, aged between 15-29 years old, made up 67% of total Facebook users. Compared to neighbours Egypt and Tunisia, these statistics reflect a very

low penetration rate. While the estimated internet penetration rate in Libya was only 5.5% in 2010, the estimated rate in Egypt and Tunisia was 24% and 34% respectively (Salem & Mourtada, 2011).

Initially, access to the internet was mainly available to the Libyan elite before internet cafes sprang up after 2000 (Freedom House, 2015). This slight improvement was due to the gradual introduction of different internet technology services such as dialup, DSL, satellite and WiMax. WiMax, for example, was introduced in 2009 by Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT) (which was chaired by Mohammed Al-Gaddafi, the oldest Gaddafi son) (OpenNet Initiative, 2009). Cell phone penetration was also high in the country. In fact, Libya was the first among African countries to reach 100 percent mobile phone penetration in 2008, which further increased in 2011, with more than 10 million mobile subscriptions, representing a penetration rate of 161 percent (Freedom House, 2015). Despite this prevalence of mobile phone usage, internet services remained limited, particularly for those in rural areas, due to the poor telecommunications infrastructure (OpenNet Initiative, 2009).

Despite the low level of internet access, the Libyan government attempted to retain some control over the flow of information and communications. In fact, there were a few examples of the regime's attempts to apply online censorship during the 2000s. The regime was actively seeking filtering tools and equipment to monitor and apply surveillance over citizens. For example, in late July 2008, the government installed a Western-made system, Amesys EAGLE, an interception package created by French company Amesys⁵, to capture internet traffic. Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment (ZTE)⁶ was another system sold to the regime by a Chinese company. The purpose of these systems was to provide the government's intelligence services with comprehensive access to a wide range of citizens' online activities (Scott-Railton, 2011). However, despite these attempts, the regime's new trend towards political reforms that coincided with Saif al-Islam's plans to modernize Libya seemed to allow for a limited space of freedom. In 2009, for example, it was evident that the regime applied only a selective filtering on a few political opposition websites rather than comprehensive filtering, while opening access to previously blocked ones (OpenNet Initiative, 2009). However, these relative steps towards openness that push the boundaries

⁵ A French computer company that sold spy tech to Libya

⁶ One of China's largest telecommunications companies

of what was permissible has failed as it ran into resistance at the top (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012).

2.4.3 The Libyan uprising

Inspired by the wave of protests that swept neighbouring countries Tunisia and Egypt Libyans began their protests on February 15th, 2011 (See Libya profile – Timeline in appendix 1). The protests were initially triggered in Benghazi due to the arrest of Fethi Tarbel, a lawyer and human rights activist, who represented the relatives of around 1,200 prisoners believed to have been killed by the regime’s security forces in Abu Salim prison in 1996. Following his arrest, hundreds of people turned to protest in the eastern city of Benghazi calling for his release, which quickly escalated to a large-scale protest that spread across the country, reaching the west of Libya, where the grip of the regime was much tighter (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012; Scott-Railton, 2011).

The call for the protest in fact circulated on social media platforms even before the arrest of Tarbel. Hassan Al-Djahmi, a young Libyan activist living in exile, launched an online appeal to protest against the regime almost two weeks before the revolution started. This was through a Facebook page he established named “*The Day of Rage*”. This Facebook page was considered one of several that emerged as a key focal point for anti-Gadaffi feeling. Calls for the “Day of Rage” were scheduled for February 17, a date historically associated with opposition to the regime. On February 17, 1987, regime forces killed around nine people who were accused of having plotted against the regime. In addition, on 17 February 2006, more than ten people were reported to have been killed by the regime forces after they protested in front of the Italian embassy in Benghazi. The eruption of these protests was due to a television broadcast showing an Italian cabinet minister wearing a t-shirt depicting an offensive cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh)⁷ (Bruguière, 2011).

Before February 17, the regime took several proactive steps to stop the wave of protests that had swept the neighbouring countries from reaching Libya. It was reported that the regime released around twelve political prisoners, which was interpreted as a conciliatory step toward its nascent opposition movement. The regime also sent two key official figures to Benghazi in order to promise reform, but in fact it led to more anger and tension. Conversely, the regime arrested a number of activists involved in online activities. Not only

⁷ Peace be upon him; an honorific phrase used by some Muslims after any mention in speech or print of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

that, Al-Gaddafi himself delivered a speech on 13 February 2011, warning Libyans not to use Facebook. Despite all this, the protestors took to the street on 15 February 2011 (Scott-Railton, 2011; Bell & Witter, 2011).

The regime attempted to crack down on protests. These crackdowns initially started with rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse protestors, before the situation evolved seriously into an armed conflict between the regime forces and poorly armed rebels (before different actors supplied weapons to the rebels soon after). In the early days of the uprising, Saif Al-Islam called for dialogue with the regime's opposition but he simultaneously promised to fight "to the last man standing" (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012, p. 62). He also warned Libyans of ending up in civil war and chaos as a consequence of these protests (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012). Despite this, the protests continued across the country. In late February 2011, the opposition forces claimed control over a big part of the east of Libya, where they established the National Transitional Council (NTC), which immediately gained recognition from several Arab and Western countries as Libya's legitimate governing body (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012).

In March 2011, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) launched Operation Odyssey Dawn, led by the US, against the regime forces, following the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 that primarily demanded a ceasefire and imposed a no fly-zone over Libya. NATO allies claimed that the purpose of their interference was only to protect Libyan civilians from the regime's attacks (NATO, 2015). However, some commentators contested this view, arguing that NATO's claim was an unjust and illegitimate cover to end the Al-Gaddafi regime. For example, Newman (2011) and Muhammad (2011) questioned the real reason for international interference in Libya, putting forward the idea that Al-Gaddafi's new plan of selling oil and other resources for gold dinar rather than the American dollar was a possible reason for NATO interference. A similar reason was also suggested to be behind the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, linking the U.S interference in Iraq to Saddam's plans to sell oil for euros instead of dollars (Heard, 2003).

At this time of NATO control, rebels eventually managed to enter Tripoli on August 20th after six months of heavy fighting with the regime forces in many cities across the country. On October 20th 2011, Al-Gaddafi was captured and killed by the rebels. This was after NATO exceeded its mandate of protecting civilians and bombed Al-Gaddafi's convoy of vehicles in his hometown, Sirte. A few days after Gaddafi's death, Saif al-Islam was also

captured in the Sahara, south of Libya, while he was trying to flee the country. On 23 October 2011, the NTC officially declared the liberation of Libya (Scott-Railton, 2011; Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012). NATO also ceased its military operations on 31 October 2011 (Scott-Railton, 2011), abdicating its responsibility of protecting civilians from violence that continued after the regime fell (Bachman, 2015).

2.4.3.1 Libyan diaspora and the use of social media during the uprising

The Libyan diaspora played a high-profile role in the 17th February revolution, organizing different online and offline activities. As discussed above, the online calls for the revolution were initially set up by Libyans in exile, and spread widely on social media. These calls reached those at home and triggered them to protest against the regime. Besides the ‘Day of Rage’ Facebook page, the Libyan Youth Movement (LYM) also emerged as one of the most popular Twitter accounts that was widely followed during the revolution. Known as @ShababLibya on Twitter, LYM was established on 2 February 2011. The founders, Ayat Mneina (based in Canada) and Omar Amer (based in the UK), wanted to take part in the Libyan revolution by helping people inside the country to globalize their voices. During the protests, both founders relied on their networks of families and relatives on the ground to update them with the latest information and news. When events accelerated, the founders needed to expand their team to be able to cover the unfolding events. More people were recruited from inside the country, who were close to the events on the ground and were able to give accurate information. LYM quickly became “a nexus” for local information as well as news updates (Scott-Railton, 2011). Despite communication difficulties due to the regime’s interruption of internet and telecommunication services, LYM successfully called the media’s attention to the events unfolding inside Libya, making it the international community’s duty to respond to such an issue (Mogul, 2012). ShababLibya’s Twitter feed remains active at the time of writing, with more than 231,000 followers (Twitter.com).

The Libyan diaspora did not only use internet and social media for the sake of covering and providing updates about the events. They also utilized digital networks to provide logistic support to the rebels inside the country. For example, Sifaw Twawa, a freedom fighter, learned how to use the Grad rocket, a type of weapon, through a Skype conference call with exiled friends with military knowledge. By giving him certain instructions, these friends enabled Twawa to launch the rocket (Pollock, 2012).

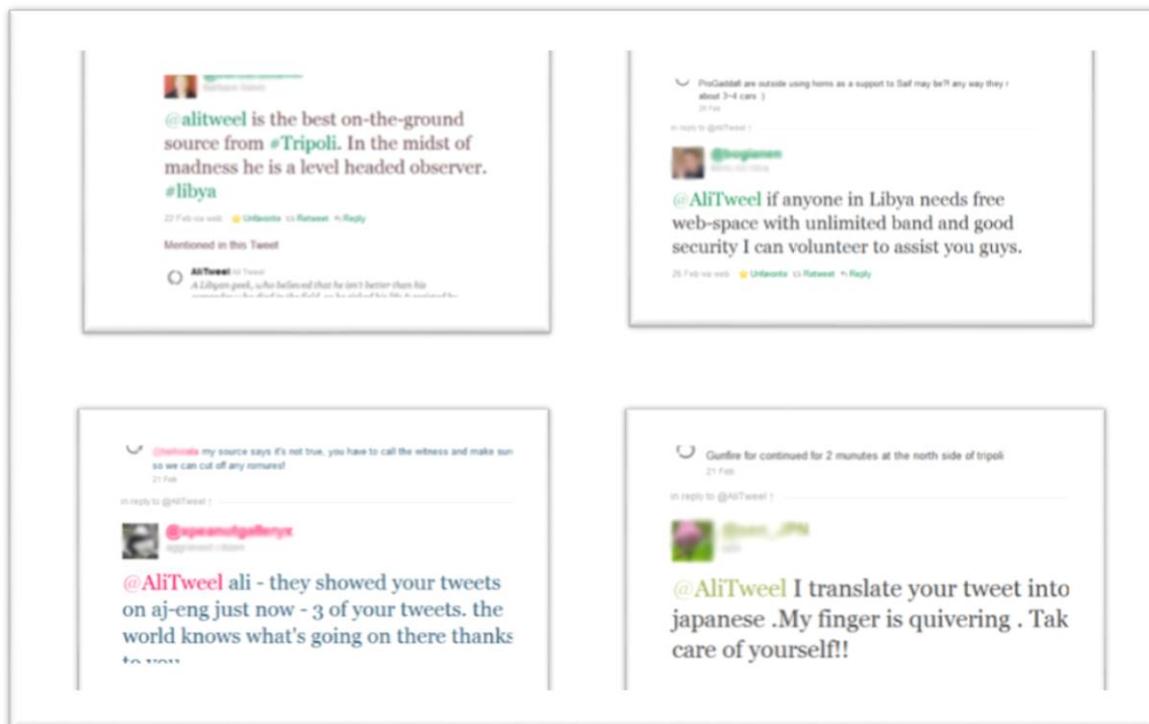
2.4.3.2 Libya Alhurra: a key information network

In addition to the digital anti-regime focal points that were established outside Libya such as the ‘Day of Rage’ Facebook page and LYM Twitter account, Libya Alhurra was an internet TV channel that emerged from inside the country and was founded by Mohammed Nabbous, an activist (Scott-Railton, 2011). Nabbous, with sufficient equipment and digital knowledge, launched his online channel. This online channel ran 24/7 on Livestream.com, broadcasting videos and sharing news updates from the ground. It started broadcasting live through a series of cameras which were installed at the court square in Benghazi, where people gathered and marched to protest against the regime on February 19th. Through a live-streamed video, Nabbous demanded international support, hoping to reach and grab global attention. His online channel became quickly popular; in its first six weeks it served 25 million “viewer minutes” (Pollock, 2012) to more than 452,000 unique viewers. Nabbous became a key contact for many international media outlets. For example, he was interviewed frequently by TV channels such as CNN, Al Jazeera, and the BBC via Skype. He provided unique and high-quality information through documenting and reporting on real-time events using his camera. Nabbous also built connections with many activists and supporters from different countries, who emerged as a cadre of information warriors. For example, Andy Carvin, a former National Public Radio digital media strategist, relied on Nabbous as a key point of contact to seek information and news to cover the uprising, building an online archive of events about Libya by tweeting and re-tweeting information and different local materials (Scott-Railton, 2011; Pollock, 2012; Hejazi, 2014). Carvin had used this approach before to cover the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings on Twitter, relying on public activists as a source of information and giving activists a space and opportunity to comment, share, and disseminate information from the ground (Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014).

On March 19, Nabbous was shot dead while he was reporting from front lines on the ground. Carvin made the assumption that NATO’s operation was a response to Nabbous’ death (Hejazi, 2014). However, this assumption regarding NATO’s intervention seemed to be unrealistic. Such a heavy military operation with many countries involved cannot, of course, be spontaneous or only in response to someone’s death (although NATO allies claimed that the purpose of their interference was only to protect Libyan civilians from the regime’s attacks) (NATO, 2015).

While Nabbous was reporting from Benghazi, Ali Tweel was reporting from inside Tripoli where the regime kept a firm grip. Ali, with a small group of other Libyan Twitter accounts, was listed by the UN Dispatch as one of nine Twitter accounts to follow for the rawest news and information on the Libyan protests (Albon, 2011). The following are examples of how Ali Tweel’s tweets⁸ were appreciated as an important source of information, and how international activists supported and engaged with his activities.

Figure 2.2 Replies and mentions to Ali Tweel's tweets



However, despite the seemingly active use of social media, Dahan (2014) downplays the role played by social media in the Libyan context. He states that the claims that “have made the use of such social media a phenomenon appear to be missing in the case of Libya” (p. 8). This view was mainly due to the fact that Libya historically had little internet access. In comparison to Tunisia and Egypt, which had the largest proportion of internet users in the Arab region, Libya experienced lower scores in the number of internet users (Hussain & Howard, 2013; Salem & Mourtada, 2011). In addition, #Libya tweets, reported to be one of the top three Twitter trends in early 2011 (Biswas & Sipes, 2014), were most likely to be posted by people outside Libya rather than inside. A study conducted through R-Shief’s Twitterminer to analyse #Libya found that tweets in Arabic were coming in at a rate of

⁸ Informed consent received from @alitweel for the reproduction of his tweet

around 2,500 a day, while tweets in English were coming in at a rate of 20,000 a day (R-Shief, 2011). As Libya is an Arabic speaking country, this may increase the validity of the above statement that #Libya tweets were most likely to be posted from outside the country.

Additionally, the country witnessed a complete internet outage on March, 3, 2011. The regime also interrupted the telecommunication services while Libyan Electronic Army (which emerged during the revolution and were likely to led by Gaddafi's son Mutassim) hijacked and defaced opposition social media sites (Scott-Railton, 2011). Furthermore, the regime also accused of jamming some TV channels such as Al Jazeera to interrupt the flow of information (Scott-Railton, 2011).

With regard to the internet shutdown, the BBC World News editor Williams (2011) commented:

“the flow of video—the so-called “user-generated-content”—has dwindled to a trickle as the authorities have periodically turned off the Internet. That means we have an additional responsibility—to be clear with our audiences not just what little we do know, but perhaps more significantly, what we don't”

This shows how getting information out of Libya was a difficult task after the internet cut off, although a range of ways and tools were used across the county to bypass the blackout of the internet (e.g. the system of two-way satellite) (Scott-Railton, 2011; Russell, 2011). Additionally, traditional media outlets played an important role during the Libyan uprising. For example, the first YouTube video of the early demonstrations that took place in Benghazi on February 15th, 2011, was picked up by Al Jazeera and re-broadcast on its TV channel and also its live website. Although the regime, through the Libyan intelligence agency, attempted to jam the Al Jazeera signal throughout the course of the events (Reuter, 2011), the channel managed to continue broadcasting and avoid the regime's interference (Beaumont, 2011). In addition, it was reported that digital materials such as videos and images were smuggled out of the country in order to be sent to the Al Jazeera channel to distribute them to the world and to Libyans who were not internet users (Scott-Railton, 2011). As the events escalated, internet technology was not only used to amplify and spread timely information on the events, it was also used to collaborate with NATO to intensify its airstrikes against Gaddafi's forces. The Libyan opposition made extensive use of the Internet and various online tools to increase the accuracy of NATO strikes by sending targeting information using various online tools (Scott-Railton, 2011). The section below

describes this collaboration between Libyan opposition and NATO's use of social media in more details.

2.4.3.3 The use of social media to get targeting and tactical information to NATO

NATO played a vital role in the Libyan uprising, facilitating the overthrow of the regime. NATO, on many occasions, used social media to identify potential targets for attacks through collaborating with many opposition actors, who provided NATO with intelligence information about the regime forces. The regime opponents used different digital tools such as Twitter and Skype. Google Maps and Google Earth were also used to locate the regime forces and create a targeting list, which was then sent to NATO through certain key contacts (Scott-Railton, 2011). For example, Rida Benfayed, a Libyan orthopaedic surgeon based in Denver, went back to Libya during the uprising and was involved in the coordination and mobilization process. Using two-way internet satellite, he created a large network by contacting many people via Skype (including doctors, diplomats and journalists), building his own operation. Through his networks, Benfayed worked as a bridge between NATO and Libyan rebels, transmitting strategic and intelligence information. The vibrant information environment that he created was described as "just like Al Jazeera!" (Pollock, 2012).

NATO officials acknowledged the importance of social media in contributing to their targeting process. One French naval officer stated that the information obtained from online Libyan networks was more accurate, precise and efficient in comparison to reports received from his other traditional intelligence methods (Pollock, 2012). In this regard, Mike Bracken, NATO Wing Commander also commented:

"We get information from open sources on the internet; we get Twitter, you name any source of media and our fusion center will deliver all of that into usable intelligence" (Gabbat, 2011).

NATO reported that its members were aware of the possibility of receiving inaccurate reports as well as disinformation (Norton-Taylor & Hopkins, 2011). Therefore, tactical information derived from social media feeds was tested and assessed against other reliable and trusted sources before being used (G. Smith, 2012). However, despite the NATO announcement that they would check the quality of targeting information, NATO was accused of bombing civilian targets. While NATO refused to investigate these incidents, Human Rights Watch (2012) conducted an investigation and found that dozens of civilians

were killed and wounded in their private homes as a result of NATO air strikes. Marina (2011) also doubted the legality of a number of air strikes conducted by NATO, pointing out that these strikes might amount to war crimes if NATO did not take the necessary precautionary measures stated in the 1949 Geneva Conventions to verify targets. After the revolution, NATO continued to provide military support to the rebels despite an increase in violence and human rights violations (Bachman, 2015). According to Marina (2011), “Libya was a theatre of atrocious crime” by many actors including NATO, the regime forces, and the insurgents (p. 85).

2.4.4 Post-revolution Libya

2.4.4.1 Background

After the revolution, in July 2012, a General National Congress (GNC) was elected in a relatively peaceful and democratic atmosphere to become the first legislative authority of Libya, taking power from the National Transitional Council in order to transition Libya to a permanent democratic constitution (ARC, 2013). However, the GNC passed its deadline without fulfilling the task of writing a constitution. Thus, a new election was organized following demonstrations and squabbles against extending the GNC’s mandate. This election resulted in the House of Representatives taking power in August 2014, with a very low election turnout at 18%, down from 60% in the first election of July 2012. After this, Libya remained awash with weapons and embroiled in a civil war, involving a number of rival armed groups that emerged in 2014. The two political bodies remained competitive, claiming legitimacy: the House of Representatives (HoR), based in the eastern city of Tubruk, and the Tripoli-based (GNC) (Freedom House, 2016).

In 2015, the United Nations facilitated a political dialogue and negotiations to establish a Government of National Accord, reconciling the two rival political and military authorities under a single administration. However, the Government of National Accord failed to unify the country’s competing bodies, resulting in Libya having three rival governments from the end of 2015 to the time of writing in 2018. The security situation has worsened leading to human rights violations. Libya’s economic situation has continued to deteriorate in recent years. The main source of revenue, oil production, has witnessed a massive decline amid ongoing crisis (Freedom House, 2017). See appendix 1 (Libya profile – Timeline) for presenting a chronology of key events of the uprising and the post-uprising period.

2.4.4.2 The old Libyan media landscape

After the fall of the regime, private media outlets have rapidly flourished, including print and satellite TV, radio, multiple online collaborations, and other forms (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012; Dowson-Zeidan, Eaton, & Wespieser, 2014). The emergence of these new media outlets is considered an unprecedented exercise of public debate for a society repressed and heavily censored for decades (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012). Yet, media regulation and legislation have been highly fluid with laws being passed and then abolished. For example, in May 2012, the NTC passed Law No. 37, which bans the glorification of Muammar Gadhafi or his sons, as well as any criticism of the 17 February revolution, ‘insulting Islam, or the prestige of the state or its institutions or judiciary. Law No. 37 caused a storm of outrage among international and local advocacy organisations before eventually being abolished by the Libyan Supreme Court in early July 2012 (Wollenberg & Pack, 2013).

In agreement with Wollenberg & Pack, Issawi (2013) also stated that the media sector in Libya lacked a clear vision and planning. She also stated that it is not clear who controls the new Libyan media outlets. While most of the media outlets are thought to be controlled by factions and armed militias or linked to political agendas (e.g. pro-liberal and pro-Islamic parties), it is unclear which media outlets are representing the state. Issawi (2013) summarised the challenges of the new Libyan media reconstruction in three points; 1) a lack of strong structures, 2) a lack of transparent funding models 3) and a lack of regulatory frameworks, shedding light on its chaotic developments.

2.4.4.3 Internet connectivity and new media landscape

According to figures from different sources (e.g. Schäfer, 2015; Freedom House, 2015), Libya experienced a massive increase in number of the internet and social media users after the revolution, mainly among young people. Despite this increase, there has been many obstacles to internet access. As stated in the Freedom House report, internet access has been badly affected by the ongoing conflict that erupt from time to time across the country. Power outages and physical damage to infrastructure have also limited the internet connectivity (Human rights watch, 2013; Freedom House, 2015).

In terms of government(s) censorship, Freedom House (2015) stated that there is little transparency and lack of legal framework related to the blocking of websites in Libya, as regulations have yet to be formulated. While social media platforms such as YouTube,

Facebook and Twitter are reported to be freely available for publics, the first instance of political censorship since the revolution was the government's blocking of news website al-Wasat in February 2015 as a result of its frequent anti- GNC government views, which triggered anger among activists and social media users. Despite the above issues, internet and social media remain an important part of the media environment in post-revolution Libya (Dowson-Zeidan et al., 2014), and therefore requiring for a better understanding.

2.4 Chapter summary

The aim of this chapter has been to draw a detailed picture of the Middle East and North Africa uprisings. It investigated each revolution separately, covering four revolutions: The Green Movement in Iran, the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the January 25th Revolution in Egypt, and the February 17th Revolution in Libya, giving the Libyan revolution a special focus. The chapter paid great attention to the role played by new technology in each revolution, addressing different arguments and debates about the impact of these technologies in each context. In general, two main arguments were highlighted. The first argument focused on the importance of new technologies for serving as sources for information flows, challenging state-controlled media and transforming the public sphere in the MENA region. The second argument focused on their dark side, and how these technologies might be used as a tool of repression against free speech and activism to control the public sphere. However, while much has been written on the role of digital media in the 2011 uprising, its democratic role remains debatable and still needs to be examined particularly in under researched contexts such as Libya. In light of this, the following chapter dedicated to discuss various theoretical perspectives and critical debates surrounding the internet and its relation to the public sphere and democracy.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the critical debates surrounding the internet and its related technologies in relation to the public sphere and democracy. The starting point for this discussion is the public sphere concept of Habermas (1989), who presented criteria and assumptions for the notion of the public sphere and discussed the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe. Since Habermas' public sphere concept was developed in the Western liberal context, some may argue that the concept may not be relevant to non-Western societies such as the Arab countries, where the flow of information and political communication are restricted and controlled by the governments. However, with the current transformations created by new interactive digital technologies, revisiting the public sphere concept has become essential to explore its relation to non-western contexts and non-liberal polities. According to Lynch, (2003), the public sphere model still offers a uniquely useful way to think about non-democratic societies such as the Arab world, allowing for analysing the complex formation and articulation of public opinion. McNair (2006) also suggest that "the evolution of a public sphere is... part of the process by which democracy evolves within nation-states. The public sphere can come into being without democracy... but democracy cannot come into being without a public sphere" (p. 140). Given that, this chapter examines the value and sustainability of the theory in light of the new technological advancements, and also discusses the concept's validity and applicability in the Arab world, particularly in relation the recent social movements.

3.2 Habermas' public sphere: definition and history

Since Habermas' book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was translated into English in 1989, the concept of the public sphere has remained not only a key concept for democratic theories but also a critical approach for understanding the relationship between media and democracy nationally and globally. Habermas developed his concept of the public sphere around the formation of bourgeois society, a new power class, which emerged during the Enlightenment period in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in England, France, and Germany. This period was characterised by modern values of equality, liberty and justice that came to replace traditional standards of hierarchy and respect for authority (Habermas, 1989).

The central feature of the public sphere, as is said to have existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, was the public use of critical reasoning in deliberation and debate. Rational-critical debate occurred mainly in institutions such as salons and coffee houses where the bourgeois gathered to discuss public issues and common concerns. The ideal public sphere as Habermas conceived, which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space, is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1989, p. 176). This space as envisaged by Habermas should exist between the state/economy and the private realm where individuals are independent from the state and market forces (Habermas, 1989).

In Habermas’ public sphere, media developments, particularly the rise of the press, facilitated the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. For Habermas, media was vital for the public engaged in critical debate because it provided them information and news about the state. He noted that the press in its several forms (e.g. newspapers, radio and television) helped to foster the public sphere by enabling the public to communicate with each other around matters of common interest in order to reach agreement and consensus.

However, in the nineteenth century, the conditions and foundations that brought into existence the bourgeois public sphere had undergone a transformation that led to its decline. The boundaries between the state and civil society, the public and private began to blur. The media press lost its critical function because of commercialisation. Media became commercialised and dominated by powerful actors. Habermas goes on to claim that the media “became a gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere” (Habermas, 1989, p. 185). Media companies were privately owned by those who were part of the capitalist economy or run by the state, and thus, they did not only produce public information, but capital and profit through advertising business. For Habermas, these issues of media ownership and political economy affected the quality and free flow of information and communication, leading people to become “simple consumers of the information” (Habermas, 1991, p. 184). This resulted in less informed citizens and consequently caused a decline and transformation in the rational-critical public sphere (Habermas, 1991). With the affordances of internet communications, people have therefore questioned whether some of these challenges of the broadcast model might be surmountable.

3.3 Criticism of Habermas' ideal public sphere

At the core of the Habermasian ideal public sphere, citizens have the right to exchange information and debate their opinion, in a free, rational, equal and open manner that leads to reaching consensus and formulating public opinion. Habermas (1991) elaborates on the domain of the public sphere as:

“a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens... Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion” (p. 398)

As such, Habermas' public sphere was envisioned as a universal system that would “never close itself off entirely” (Habermas, 1989, p. 37) to any member of society. All members of the public, with interest to participate, can enjoy free access to a variety of ideas, arguments, and information that are separate from political and economic power to improve society and influence decision-making policy (Habermas, 1991). According to Dahlgren (2005, p. 48) a functioning public sphere is understood as “a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates— ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion)”. Universality or inclusivity in the sense of “presupposing the equality of status” (Habermas, 1989, p. 36) was also central to Habermas' theory, so that participation is inclusive, free and open to all in an equal manner regardless of their positions or identities. For Habermas, public discussion and contribution are not based on citizens' socio-economic status or their identities. Rather, they are based on the strength of their argument and persuasion that is formed around rationality and logic of speech.

However, Habermas' idealized concepts of equality, rationality, inclusiveness and openness are not really represented in his notion of the public sphere. Habermas was subject to considerable criticism immediately after publishing the English version of his book, leading to revisions in his later writings. In her seminal article, *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, Fraser (1990), from a feminist perspective, questioned the Habermasian concept of a single public sphere which was formulated around the interests of the male-dominant bourgeoisie. Fraser criticised the concept of the public sphere as it was “a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule” (p. 62). She argued that Habermas fails in recognizing the non-bourgeois public spheres, resulting in

excluding what she referred to as “subaltern counterpublics” or “competing publics” such as women, working class and other ethnicities (p. 67). Fraser proposed that by excluding these alternative publics, the egalitarian principle in society that Habermas implies in his ideal notion of the public sphere therefore is not represented, and the subordinate groups therefore could not express or communicate particular needs, concerns and interests (Fraser, 1990). Fraser believed that in stratified and multicultural societies “the ideal of participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public” (p. 127). For her, an egalitarian and multi-cultural society is premised on the idea of plurality of public arenas that involve participation of a multiplicity of groups with diverse values and beliefs. In agreement with Fraser, Finlayson (2005) also points out that the core elements of the Habermasian concept such as rationality, equality, openness, freedom and inclusiveness, were simply ideologies or illusions. Moreover, he suggests that the concept of the public sphere remained “merely Utopian, an inclusive and egalitarian vision of society worthy of pursuit, but never fully realised. The concept of bourgeois public sphere remained ideological in that sense too” (p. 12).

Another point of concern was that Habermas assumes that a functioning democratic public sphere requires a sharp division of civil society and the state (Habermas, 1989). However, Fraser (1990) believes that drawing a line between the two realms is not relevant because the line between civil society and state is blurred. Fraser also believes that the blurring line between the two realms does not undermine democracy. Rather, it represents a democratic advance through the relationship of what she called ‘weak public’ and ‘strong public’. The former are members of the public who discuss issues, but have less chance to make a decision, while the latter refers to the public who have the ability to take decisions. In her perspective, the weak public can have a representative from the strong public who can translate their opinion into authoritative decisions. Thus, the sharp separation between the state and civil society that Habermas suggested for a functioning public sphere is not consistent with how Fraser views it.

Despite all these criticisms, scholars do not reject the whole concept of the public sphere. Fraser herself, for example, argued that Habermas’ bourgeois model could be developed and reformulated to produce an alternative post-bourgeois conception. In fact, Habermas himself modifies and reformulate his initial idea of the public sphere in response to different critiques and evaluation of his idea. In this regard, Habermas conceded that he presented a “stylized picture of the liberal elements of the bourgeois public sphere” (Habermas, 1989,

p. 44) rather than an exact historical explanation. In his book *Further Reflections on the Public Sphere*, he noted that “he should have made it clearer that he was establishing an ‘ideal type’ and not a normative ideal” (Hahn, 2000, p.266). However, critical debates and discussions continue to surround Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, focusing on the current alterations and transformations brought about by the emergence of the internet and other advanced technologies. A more detailed account of the internet and its democratic potential is given in the following section.

3.4 Internet, social media and the networked public sphere

The Habermasian concept of the public sphere has triggered much debate in relation to the potential of internet and social media for changing the social structure and transforming the public sphere (Boeder, 2005; Castells, 2008; Papacharissi, 2009; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Currently, this debate about the internet as a medium of interaction and communication involves both criticism and praise for its democratic potential. In the contemporary high-tech networked society, developments in information technology evoke massive changes in the ways people communicate and obtain information. One important characteristic of the internet that promotes its role in reviving the public sphere is that the internet can provide the conditions for a more universal environment, especially in light of the reduction in physical public spaces in modern urban planning (Davis, 1999). The internet establishes a virtual public space in which individuals can interact, exchange content, share and produce information not only on a local scale but also globally. Anyone with internet access and basic digital literacy could potentially participate in an equal manner without any major barriers to entry. Castells refer to this virtual environment enabled by the new technological developments as “the new global public sphere” (Castells, 2008, p. 90). Unlike the past format of technology that was based on one-to-one interaction (e.g. telephone, telegraph) or on one-to-many interaction (print media, radio and television), the internet allows for many-to-many model interactions in which individuals can be both receivers and producers of information (Castells, 2008).

Individuals, therefore, are no longer passive recipients. Rather, they are in a dialogic relation with the creator of the message; thus, they participate in defining the agenda of the conversation. This interactive feature of the internet revives the participatory nature of the ideal public sphere and empowers individuals to take part in public debate at low cost (Dahlberg, 2001). In this regard, Murru (2009) states that “in online contexts anyone can potentially take the role of speaker with practically no cost, thus multiplying the source of

news and freeing the flux of communication and information from any sort of system control (economic or political)” (p.134).

In addition, the internet is a tool of great flexibility because it allows individuals to interact anonymously. Several studies find that the anonymity afforded by internet and social media empowers individuals and promotes participation. Norris (2004, p. 5), for example, states that “textual communication via the Internet strips away the standard visual and aural cues of social identity—including those of gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status—plausibly promoting heterogeneity”. This affordance of anonymity, therefore, may encourage many people to contribute to online discussions because their contributions are not based on the social status or characteristics of the individual. Rather, they are based on the weight and rationality of their discussion. In repressive regimes, such anonymity is also vital for providing more freedom of speech because it allows citizens who may feel marginalized or may be at risk to express their dissenting views and opinions (Stromer-Galley, 2006). As such, the internet can lead to a more inclusive and participatory environment of interaction which is significant for fostering the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Howard & Hussain, 2011). According to Stumpel (2009), the recently-emerged digital networks such as blogs and Twitter constitute some aspects of Habermas’ public sphere, because they allow for new alternative communicative spaces to develop.

However, although anonymity of cyberspace leads to more participatory contributions, it can simultaneously promote division and isolation. According Sunstein, (2002) communicating anonymously may disperse the communication process rather than developing a common ground between the various lines of debate and points of view. In fact, Sunstein believes that the internet has a tendency to be a breeding ground for polarization: people who share the same views and beliefs isolate themselves by interacting only with like-minded people, in a way that resembles something like an echo chamber. This is something common in the online environment (Fuchs, 2010; Vaidhyathan, 2018). Habermas himself points out that “in the context of liberal regimes, the Internet serves to fragment focused audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics” (Habermas, 2006, p. 423). boyd (2010) has a similar point of view. She stated that in a networked society, people have a tendency to connect with others like themselves so that information is likely to flow in ways that create and reinforce social divides rather than disintegrate them. As such, users might become intellectually isolated because they get significantly less contact with challenging viewpoints. As boyd puts it, “we all live in our own worlds with people

who share our values; with networked media, it can be hard to see beyond that if we are not looking” (p. 34).

In this regard, Tufekci (2017), in her recent book, *Twitter and Tear Gas: the Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, discussed the role of algorithmic filtering in creating this isolated environment. She demonstrated how algorithmic filtering, which results from personalized searches in digital environment, could isolate people in their own worlds, and provide them selective information resulting from their past activities. As a result, confirmation bias and the echo-chamber effect could be fostered and promoted. Tufekci (2017) also discussed how algorithmic filtering could lead to the creation of homogeneous clusters, who “then go on undertake vicious battles online, increasing polarization and thus turning off many people from politics” (p. xxix).

As far back as 1999, Davis discussed a similar case in point in his book *The Web of Politics*. He argued that the aggressive and hostile discussion that often dominates online forums tends to lead the well-mannered to eventually withdraw from political participation. For Davis, such aggressive and uncivil discussion is likely to be a result of the anonymity afforded by the web. Being anonymous may make some users behave in a socially unacceptable way without having to take responsibility for their actions. According to more recent work exploring social media and political polarisation (e.g. Fuchs, 2010; Iosifidis, 2011; Vaidhyanathan; 2018), the open democratic space afforded by the internet could alternatively turn into a space of chaos, partisanship and irrationality. An example of such a chaotic online environment is the audience’s responses to the Oscar Grant shooting incident where a young African-American man was fatally shot by a police officer. In this case, Antony & Thomas (2010) analysed the audience’s comments posted in response to the video of this incident, and found that the majority of content around the video was “inflammatory and derogatory” (p.1292), meaning the online sphere is not truly democratic. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind the strong racial undertones of this case.

Yet, although such emotionally charged or polarised content may not necessarily be compatible with the Habermasian notion of rational critical discourse, these modes of expression are not considered as irrelevant to the public sphere. In fact, such forms of content construct a viable aspect of political engagement. According to Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) the aim of public discussion is not the exclusion or elimination of

difference, but rather its continuous deliberation and recognition of divergent points of view. In this regard, Chantal Mouffe (2005) stated that passion is an important aspect of democratic practice. She emphasised that passion should not be excluded from the rational public sphere. For her, the public sphere is about bringing to the fore passion and disagreements in order to confront them (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). Many recent studies also emphasised the same point of view (e.g. Atton, 2002; Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Dahlberg & Siapera, 2007). They argue that the main contribution of the internet to democracy is its potential to promote a free and open dialogue, where oppositional and conflicting opinions can exist. This way of understanding the democratic potential of the internet, according to Moussa (2013), has been clearly demonstrated in the recent Arab spring uprisings. In her perspective, the internet enabled different political groups to interact, conflict and express their dissent during the events. However, the role of new technology in the Arab Spring is a hot topic that has initiated controversial discussions among many scholars since 2010/2011. The following section, therefore, moves on to discuss some of these arguments, shedding light on the networked Arab public sphere and its potentials and challenges in the light of the Arab Spring.

3.5 The emergence of the new networked Arab public sphere: its potential and challenges

The Arab world has a long history of building up an extensive censorship system over the mass media, the most powerful means of disseminating information in the region. The Arab public sphere was tightly controlled, closed, and characterised by repression (Howard, 2010; Lynch, 2003). In this repressive climate, many people avoid talking about politics mainly due to their fear of government repression (Lynch, 2003; Aouragh, 2011; Issawi, 2013). However, since the introduction of the satellite TV channel Al Jazeera in the 1990s (established in Qatar and first run by BBC-trained professionals), the information environment in the Arab world has been transformed (Lynch, 2003; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Through covering sensitive issues and hot topics, Al Jazeera helped to create the beginning of a new Arab public sphere, and give Arab publics unprecedented access to various information and knowledge about different aspects of Arab political life (Lynch, 2003). Al Jazeera, as such, established a new space for political communication, posing serious challenges to states' hegemony in controlling information flow in the region.

Along with satellite TV channels, the introduction of the internet and its related technologies in 1991 has also shaped and transformed the information environment in the Arab region (Howard, 2010; Lim, 2013). Hudson (2001) predicted that information technology was “beginning to exert a revolutionary force across the Arab world... transforming Arab political culture”. Lynch (2006) also speculated that the internet held the prospect of a new kind of Arab public sphere that might shape the dynamics of Arab public opinion and political activism in the decades to come. According to Tufekci & Wilson (2012), one of the most important events in the transformation of the Arab public sphere, particularly in Egypt, was the introduction of the Arabic version of Facebook which began in March 2009. It enabled millions of users for the first time in modern Arabic history to discuss political issues different from the mainstream, including poverty, human rights and corruption. It also led to a number of small protests, specifically in Egypt, but remained firmly under control until the breakout of the Arab Spring. This suggest that although new internet technologies do not substitute for democracy, they provided means for Arabs to express themselves and challenge state censorship long before the outbreak of the Arab Spring (Randeree, 2011).

During the Arab Spring uprisings, Aouragh, (2011) argued that social media such as Facebook and Twitter had become an alternative public sphere. In Egypt, for example, these platforms became a means for an important segment of Egyptians, who had similar interests, to express their dissent and exchange information about demonstrations (Aouragh, 2011). Alec Ross, Hillary Clinton’s senior adviser, called the internet the “Che Guevara of the twenty-first century” in his comment on the way digital media was used during the Arab Spring uprisings, crediting these technologies with facilitating overthrowing the long-standing regimes in the Arab region (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 6). However, without emphasising such overly optimistic views of social media, it is important to state that its role during the Arab Spring cannot be understood without taking into account the impact of the old media. Throughout the events, both forms of media, old and new, enhanced each other and shaped complex interrelationships (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, & Freelon, 2012). Due to the dangerous situation on the ground and the fast flow of events, traditional press and other media organizations relied on citizens as a source of information to produce their news. Using social media networks to convey news to the world, ordinary citizens became news creators (Hermida et al., 2014). The announcements of TV channels such as Al Jazeera and BBC TV are a good illustration of this collaboration

between citizens in politically hot places and editors in newsrooms. When the Arab Spring sparked, Al Jazeera, for instance, reactivated its platform Sharek (share) (Scott-Railton, 2011), which was first introduced in 2008, which allowed people to upload their amateur footage and videos. These online materials were then aired on the Al Jazeera channel, after going through verification processes. It was reported that more than 1,600 videos per day were uploaded to the site during the Arab Spring events (Scott-Railton, 2011). In the same way, a short film was made by the BBC to guide users in documenting and sharing their experiences from the ground. Once the required content was submitted, procedures were applied to confirm the news before being circulated on the channel (Hänska-Ahy & Shapour, 2013).

These new practices have led to a fundamental shift in the traditional ways of generating information and news. Chadwick (2011) has previously termed this phenomenon of news production “The Political Information Cycle” in which ‘old’ and ‘new’ media is seen as part of an increasingly hybrid media system rather than binary. Chadwick showed how the “Political Information Cycles” are built on news-making assemblages that combine older and newer media logics, presenting new opportunities for non-elite actors to shape media and political agendas through timely interventions and interactions with professional journalists. This integrative aspects of hybridity shapes power relations among actors and ultimately affects the flows and meanings of news.

Tufekci & Wilson (2012) also recognized the connectivity infrastructure as a complex ecology that involves interrelated components rather than focusing on any particular device or platform. While social media was a source of information on the protests, they found that just under half of the participants found out about the demonstrations face-to-face. Tufekci & Wilson view the internet and social media as one portion of the emergence of *a new system of political communication*. Through this concept, they emphasise the importance of a mix of traditional and digital tools in the emergent new media ecology, stating that:

“events in North Africa and the Middle East are now being shaped by a new system of political communication which sets into sharp relief the importance of digitally mediated interpersonal communication. This system is characterized by the increasingly interrelated use of satellite television, the Internet (particularly social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter), and the widespread use of Internet-enabled cellphones capable of transmitting photos and video” (p. 377).

This hybrid media system according to them contributed to the formation of a new kind of public sphere in the Arab world, and therefore, offers new opportunities to those seeking change and enhance their ability to undertake collective action. The widespread use of cell phone cameras improved citizens' ability to document events and record pictures and videos, allowing them to act as watchdogs to convey information and spot government misconduct.

This practice of watching was termed by Steve Mann as “sousveillance”, meaning that citizens can employ their camera devices to observe, monitor and gather information about higher authorities (Mann, Nolan, & Wellman, 2003). During the Arab Spring, the widespread images and video footages that showed how protesters were violently repressed by their government is a good example of this. It proved successful in drawing international attention, particularly when these user-generated content gained further spread through global news networks such as Al-Jazeera (Lynch, 2011). As stated by Castells (2011, p. 413), “the powerful have been spying on their subjects since the beginning of history, but the subjects can now watch the powerful, at least to a greater extent than in the past. We have all become potential citizen journalists who, if equipped with a mobile phone, can record and instantly upload to the global networks any wrongdoing by anyone, anywhere”.

Yet activists, and regular citizens who choose to document regime violence and misconducts by posting images and releasing videos online are risking much to contest authoritarian governments. As Evgeny Morozov and other sceptics point out, regimes are increasingly developing their adaptation strategies of internet technologies to crack down on protesters on- and off-line (Morozov, 2012). This is evident in the case of the Arab Spring and the Green movement in Iran, where many activists and demonstrators were harassed or arrested by their governments (Morozov, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013). Morozov called these practices of arrest and abuse “the post-protest clean up” (Morozov, 2012). In this way, even anonymous online communications cannot entirely create a freer and safer environment to communicate around politics or organize social actions. Emerging technologies such as facial recognition, voice analysis, and mobile tracking could call into question online anonymity as a parameter of safety when used by repressive regimes (Morozov, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013). These tendencies of surveillance, therefore, could limit people's participation in taking actions towards social or political change due to fear of government repression. According to Iskandar (2006), in non-democratic societies, fear of government retaliation often results in apathetic political attitudes among

citizens. As mentioned previously, long before the Arab Spring, citizens in the Arab region suffered from strict surveillance on the internet. In 2008, for example, Egypt introduced regulations for using internet cafes, requiring users to submit personal details such as a name and phone number before logging in (Bailly, 2012). In Saudi Arabia, although citizens have easy access to the internet, the country has applied a comprehensive internet censorship system, similar to the system applied in Iran and China (Hussain & Howard, 2013). Likewise, in UAE, despite its rank as the Arabic nation with the highest percentage of new Facebook user penetration in 2010, the country received the lowest score for internet freedom (Salem & Mourtada, 2011).

In addition, communicating anonymously using fake identities to avoid government surveillance considered a violation of some social media companies' user agreement (Howard & Hussain, 2013). During the Egyptian revolution, for example, some protest group pages were shut down by the Facebook company before activists successfully reinstated them. The reason was because the company requires its users to use real identities, while the company, as public information infrastructure, fails to recognise the needs of those living in dictatorships, who need levels of anonymity to avoid government surveillance (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

In addition, while the United States, the home of these big companies such as Facebook and Google, has announced a new approach to promote internet freedom overseas in 2010 by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Shirky, 2011), it has often been accused of applying different ways of surveillance and censorship (Howard, 2010; Tufekci, 2017). Edward Snowden revealed details of the existence of a massive U.S. government surveillance program at a large scale including spying not only on its citizens but also on leaders of other foreign countries (Inkster, 2014; Tufekci, 2017). Another example of the U.S surveillance and censorship approach was in relation to 2003 invasion of Iraq. As stated by Elmer (as cited in Howard, 2010), in 2003 the US government added the word "Iraq" to a list of excluded search words on the internet to ban large companies such as Google from archiving information related to the Iraqi security situation. This process prevented citizens around the globe from learning about political life in Iraq.

This discussion clearly shows the contradictory approach of US media policy, which as Chomsky observes often involves spreading manipulative news, while ignoring reporting on government operations, and engendering necessary public illusions until the populace

take no heed of these incidents, which are then portrayed as scandals (Chomsky, 2004). The processes of surveillance which is often interrelated with censorship, therefore, is not simply a problem of government agencies trying to control online content; it is a complex activity that often involves different actors such as the U.S. based firms, telecommunications policy makers from international agencies, cultural elites, and even foreign governments (Howard, 2010).

In addition to the surveillance and censorship issue, the development of the networked Arab public sphere, as elsewhere, carries several other challenges. The internet, in theory, is open to anyone, allowing subaltern groups to voice their views and build solidarity (Harlow & Harp, 2012). In practice, it is essential to say that not all publics have the internet access or the required skills to participate equally, particularly in developing societies. For instance, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), showed that the percentage of internet users in Arab states was 24.3% in 2010 and 37.0% in 2015; while in Europe, the figure was 66.6% in 2010 and 77.6% in 2015. The gap between the “information-rich” and the “information-poor” is aggravated in contemporary society, the result being that the internet has generated a more segmented model of the public sphere as opposed to the inclusive one introduced by Habermas (Gitlin, as cited in Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 34).

However, the digital divide is not the only challenge to the public sphere. According to many scholars (e.g. Papacharissi, 2009; Fuchs, 2010; Vaidhyanathan, 2018), although online media enables and empowers citizens, it simultaneously reproduces gender, class, and race inequalities of the offline public sphere. They argued that greater access to information could mean greater access to political elites which could lead to shape and influence public opinion. In this regard, Rheingold (2000, p. 297) argued that “the telecommunications industry is a business, viewed primarily as an economic player. It gives certain people access to means of influencing certain other people's thoughts and perceptions, and that access – who has it and who doesn't have it – is intimately connected with political power”. Gerhards & Schafer (2010) suggest that the internet can be dominated by those already politically active rather than being a space for marginalised people. The internet is similar to traditional media in terms of being controlled by traditional gatekeepers. This means that the minority can control opinions and shape the actions of publics. According to Gerbaudo (2012), the contemporary movements such as the Arab Spring uprisings were not entirely leaderless. He asserts that social media platforms are strongly characterized by hierarchical structure exemplified by the emergence

of soft leadership and liquid forms of organization. For him, influential Facebook administrators and Twitter users are considered new forms of leadership, playing a vital role in contemporary collective movements. He argued that the forms of social media communication during the 2011 events were characterised by “a power law distribution” meaning that most of the communication flow was controlled by a handful of people such as activists and powerful actors. For example, the activist Wael Ghonim in Egypt played a pivotal role in initiating and sustaining events in their countries through the use of social media.

This discussion presents the concept of the logic of connective action introduced by Bennett & Segerberg (2012). In their interesting study, they distinguish between the logic of collective and connective action. The former involves high levels of organisational resources and hierarchical institutions, while the latter centres on personalised content shared across social media, where individuals are able to join protests without having to buy into an ideological perspective. Bennett & Segerberg stated that the latter model applies to the recent contemporary large-scale protests (e.g. Arab Spring, los Indignados in Spain and Occupy Wall Street) where internet and social media took the role of conventional organizations and enabled personalized engagement. According to them, the personal slogans that spread across social media networks (e.g. ‘we are the 99 per cent’ of the Occupy movement) had the potential to retain people’s emotional commitment to action, leading them to scale up events more quickly and get larger audiences.

According to Gitlin (2003), movement activities are likely to involve drama and spectacle, passion and emotion, conflict and threat aspects. In contrast to the rational-based public sphere, many scholars acknowledged the importance of emotions in the public sphere, particularly in relation to social movements. Melucci (1996), for example, views emotions as an important element of collective actions. He argued that “there is no cognition without feeling and no meaning without emotion” (p. 71). Similarly, Jasper (2011) described emotion as a means of action to achieve political goals, where it is used to recruit new participants and sustain movement.

More recently, there has been increased scholarly attention paid to the emotional public sphere in relation to the contemporary movements. In their study of Twitter posts with the #egypt hashtag in the period pre- and post-resignation of Hosni Mubarak, Zizi Papacharissi & De Fatima Oliveira (2012) demonstrated the importance of Twitter in affording

individuals opportunities to share affective news and personal stories, that contributed to driving the movement and sustaining publics' involvement in the events. Papacharissi (2015) developed her work further in her recent book "*Affective Public*", which examines the use of Twitter hashtags including the cases of Egypt and Occupy Wall Street. In this book, Papacharissi defines affective publics as "networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (p. 125). She states that affect may result in driving a movement forward but it may simultaneously entrap publics in a loop of sustained spectatorship. Papacharissi concludes that discourses produced via Twitter present a departure from the ideal rational discussion to a form of discussion that combines "news, fact, drama and opinion into one, to the point where telling one from the other was impossible and doing so missed the point" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 318).

Castells (2012) and Gerbaudo (2012, 2016) also discussed the emotional dimension of the public sphere in relation to recent movements, mainly the Arab uprisings, the Indignados movement in Spain, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the US. Both stressed the importance of the internet in creating shared feelings and a sense of togetherness that motivated dispersed participants to come together and rise against their regime. However, Gerbaudo (2012) stated that once the protests reached public spaces, the role of social media declined and face-to-face communication took over and became more effective. He also argued that although moments of digital enthusiasm are considered a key factor in motivating protest participation, they may run the risk of evanescence in the aftermath of events. He illustrated this point by stating that "once these events are over, the messages linked to them disappear into the electronic dustbin and become of interest only to the researcher or the abnormally curious, not to mention very difficult to retrieve" (p. 166).

This evanescent character of social media messages and the ever-changing communicative flow could be linked to Morozov's influential work *The Net Delusion* (Morozov, 2011a). He argued that describing the contemporary events as a "Twitter Revolution" was simply a "wild fantasy". The reason for his argument is that much of the momentum of the Iran movement, for example, was lost in the months subsequent to the election. Morozov (2009) views online political activity as a mere "slacktivism", a concept which points to people being required to exert only the small effort of just clicking on online political topics rather than actively engaging in different forms of productive activism. He believes that slacktivism is "feel-good activism that has zero political or social impact" but it creates "an

illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group” (Morozov, 2009, para.1). Overall, Morozov disagrees with the optimistic vision of the democratic potential of the internet, and often criticises Western interpretations of describing information technology as liberator (Morozov, 2011).

This pessimistic vision of the impact of social media on political activism has also been taken up by Malcolm Gladwell (2010). Gladwell believes that offline activism is a “strong-tie” phenomenon, where people feel more secure beside their close friends and family in standing up and voicing their opinion, particularly in dangerous situations. Online activism, characterised by “weak-tie” connections, is seen by him as having low impact in the real world, and as being less likely to result in high risk activism. However, these arguments are contested by Tufekci (2017). She views online activism as not simply “just clicking.” She believes that even a mere act such as changing a profile picture on Facebook to protest discrimination against a certain cause may over time contribute to changing culture and make social change possible. In her perspective, “in a repressive country, tweeting may be a very brave act, while marching on the streets may present few difficulties in a more advanced democracy” (Tufekci, 2017, p. xxvi).

The networked public sphere is fraught with considerable challenges. Very recently, Facebook, as part of its “Hard Questions” series, published a set of blog posts to assess the platform’s impact on democracy in relation to elections, uprisings, partisan politics, and fake news. The company admitted that social media can be bad for even a well-functioning democracy. The widespread amount of misinformation and hoaxes on social media poses a real challenge for the company. Samidh Chakrabarti (2018), the product manager for civic engagement at Facebook, stated that the company is fighting the downside of the platform on democracy, working with third party fact checkers to identify false information and stories. However, this is not an easy task to achieve. Chakrabarti (2018) writes, “Even with all these countermeasures, the battle will never end” (para, 19).

In this complex networked public sphere, too much content competes for attention, and being able to generate and disseminate information on social media does not mean equal distribution of resources and opportunities (boyd, 2010; Tufekci, 2017). According to boyd (2010), messages which include highly stimulating content (e.g. violence, anger or gossip) often find their way easily to people and create emotional responses. Therefore, people have to learn how to consume such content because distinguishing between what is fake

and what is true is a real struggle in our networked society. Tufekci (2017) described this situation as “futile” because people become suspicious of everything, and this feeling is likely to lead them to follow information that resonates with their existing views and ideologies. As a result, people are likely to be isolated and excluded in their own worlds, leading us back to Habermas’ (2006) concerns about the quality of discussion on the web, and how the internet serves to fragment focused audiences into isolated publics.

3.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has examined the existing literature with the aims of reviewing the public sphere concept in the existing body of knowledge and establishing an area of contribution to knowledge. Through engaging with different debates around the Habermasian public sphere concept, the chapter demonstrates that Habermas’ concept of a single, universal public sphere has remained an unreachable ideal, and has evaporated in favour of multiple competing publics (Fraser, 1990). Studying the literature also shows that the internet and its related technology do not constitute a public sphere in the Habermasian sense. It can be seen that although these technological advancements have transformed the public sphere, their impact upon democratic politics reveals a complex picture that warns against oversimplistic or celebratory accounts of technology. The two false positions of the earlier experiments in digital democracy, optimism versus pessimism, were found to be not relevant anymore (Shirky, 2011; Morozov, 2011). This thesis, therefore, moves to embrace a more complex way of thinking to understand the relationship between technology and society, taking into account political, social and cultural context.

While much of the research so far has focused mostly upon Egypt or Tunisia, very little is known about the extent to which sites such as Facebook played a role in the Libyan uprising. The Libyan uprising has received limited attention despite its rich digital experience. The growing adoption of digital technologies in the country along with considerable political, social and security challenges are introducing complex dynamics that require a better understanding. Rather than generalising the Arab digital experience, it is valuable to focus on specific cases to highlight the specificity of certain contexts (Zayani, 2015). This study aims to make a contribution to fill this gap in knowledge.

The study also aims to find out how the use of internet and social media has evolved over time and circumstances, which is something not previously investigated. Previous studies have mainly focused on the time in which uprisings occurred rather than following how

everyday uses, routines and experiences has changed over time. The post-Arab Spring period is expected to provide rich and interesting cases that are worthwhile for study. This thesis, therefore, attempts not only to focus on a single period of time, but aims to advance our understanding of the nature of the emergent networked public sphere in Libya during three critical phases, before, during and after the uprising.

Chapter 4: Research methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology used for this study. It explains the choices that have been taken in order to conduct the research, introduces the research philosophical paradigms, and provides a review of the methods chosen for data collection and analysis. It offers the reasoning behind the choices made in order to achieve the study aim, highlighting the factors and challenges in conducting the study in a dynamic, fast-paced and war-zone environment.

4.2 Research philosophical paradigms

This section discusses a number of philosophical paradigms that are widely used in the social sciences to then focus on the one selected for the current study. Pickard (2007) defined a paradigm as a “world view that is accepted by members of a particular scientific discipline which guides the subject of the research, the activity of the research and the nature of the research (p. 5). Creswell (2013) stated that a paradigm can be thought of as “abstract ideas and beliefs that inform our research” (p. 16). Philosophical paradigms are important because they affect the practice of the research, which in turn might influence knowledge that researchers attempt to develop; thus, they require recognition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Crotty (2003) research philosophy can help researchers to: 1) identify the most appropriate research design; 2) assess and evaluate methodological choices; 3) enhance their creativity.

In social science, the philosophical assumptions that underline all research are ontological, epistemological and methodological. The term ontology is concerned with the nature of reality (Guba, 1990). It relates to “the nature of social phenomena – are they relatively inert and beyond our influence or are they a product of social interaction?” (Bryman, A. & Bell, 2015, p. 6). These two ontological questions are referred to as objectivism and constructivism. Objectivism implies that social phenomena exist independently or separately from social actors (Neuman, 2011). In this position, objectivists believe that there is a single and pre-given reality that can be measured or observed following a scientific model (Merriam, 2009; Bryman, 2012). This means that there is only one way to understand any subject. Constructivism, on the other hand, asserts that social phenomena are subjective and reality is multiple rather than single. The social world, in constructivism, is seen as the product of human interactions and participation in social life (Martens, 2005).

The researcher, in this position, attempts to see things from human actors' point of view in order to grasp the meanings of their behaviour (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, the reality requires the need for active interpreting and constructing individual knowledge representations in order to understand how they act and make sense of their everyday actions.

While ontology is associated with the nature of reality, epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge, and the ways of understanding and explaining reality. In short, epistemology addresses the question of 'how do we know something?' (Guba, 1990; Merriam, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Creswell, 2013). To understand social phenomena, there are three basic epistemological paradigms in research, namely positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism. The three positions tend to follow different methodological procedures and strategies to discover knowledge (Merriam, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Silverman (2005, p. 99), methodology "refers to the choices we make about cases to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data analysis, etc., in planning and executing a research study". Positivists usually employ a quantitative approach, and it is typically associated with the testing of theory using highly structured methods such as experiments and questionnaires (Bryman, 2012). Interpretivists prefer a qualitative approach, and this is usually associated with the generation of theory using in-depth investigations (Creswell, 2013), while pragmatists tend to use a mixed methods approach to better understand and solve the problem (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The table below provides a detailed overview of the most common paradigms in social science research and explains key beliefs about them.

Table 4.1. Summary of most common paradigms in social science research

Paradigm	Ontology What is reality?	Epistemology How do you know reality?	Methodology How do you go about finding it out?
Positivism	There is a single reality (Merriam, 2009).	Reality can be objectively measured and observed (Merriam, 2009).	It is usually associated with quantitative methods of data collection and analysis such as questionnaires and experiments (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2013).
Interpretivism/constructivism	There is no single reality. “reality is socially constructed” (Martens, 2005, p. 12). Reality is seen through individuals’ lenses, which are shaped by their experience and their subjectivity (Neuman, 2011).	Reality needs to be interpreted in order to discover underlying meaning of events and actions through accessing multiple perspectives of individuals or groups (Neuman, 2011).	It is usually associated with qualitative methods of data collection and analysis such as qualitative interviews, observations, case studies, and narrative analysis (Creswell, 2003).
Pragmatism	Reality is changeable and constantly renegotiated, debated and interpreted. Pragmatism tends to focus on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the research problem (Creswell, 2003, p.11).	Therefore, the best method to use is the one that solves the problem (Creswell, 2003).	It is usually associated with mixed methods of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2003).

In the light of the above considerations, the interpretivist/constructivist position is applied because it offers an appropriate route for this research. The aim of this study is to advance our understanding of the nature of the emergent Libyan networked public sphere, and its evolution over the past few years. In order to do so, in-depth interviews with young people

and qualitative content analysis of a sample of popular Facebook pages are conducted. In the interpretivist/ constructivist position, the researcher believes that people's stories, experiences, interactions and uses are value laden, subjective and differ from one to another (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In other words, they are social phenomena constructed through social interaction between humans and their world. By accessing multiple perspectives and realities, this study seeks to bring into consciousness hidden structural forces such as political and cultural values that are an integral part of the social phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). The interpretation and understanding of the meaning inherent in those social realities can then define the social phenomena of the emergent networked public sphere in Libya.

What is also important about taking the interpretivist/ constructivist position is the ability to use qualitative methods under this paradigm. The reason for preferring a qualitative rather than quantitative approach is that the former is more suitable for understanding a complex social phenomenon. Unlike a quantitative approach which views social reality as external and uses standardised tools to discover it, qualitative methods offer the opportunity to explore beliefs, meanings, and thoughts from the studied individuals' perspectives (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A qualitative approach helps to answer the questions of how and what, giving the researcher the advantage of gaining in-depth understanding of the situation (Seidman, 1991).

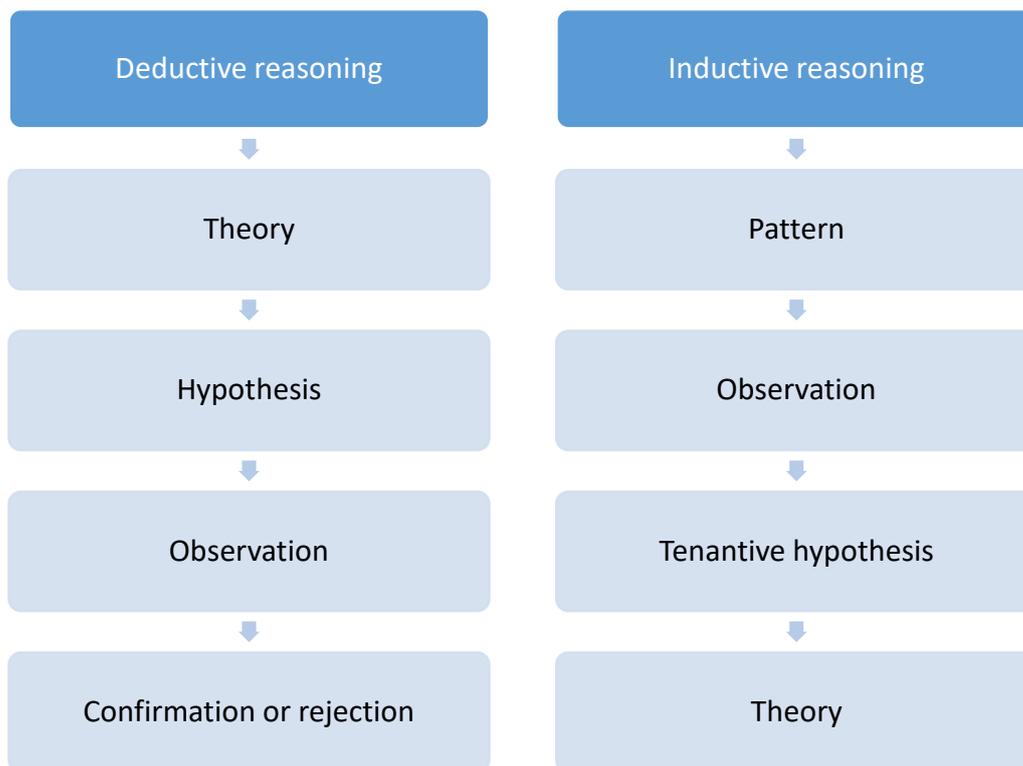
The wealth of detailed data that emerges from employing qualitative research is described by Patton (1990) as the "fruit" of qualitative methods. It provides a fuller picture of the issue under study, enabling the reader to experience the phenomena as if they were there (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This kind of exploration of the social world is considered a valuable feature of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, a qualitative approach is best suited for this study to better understand, explore and capture nuanced details of the role of technology in the Libyan context.

4.3 Deductive and inductive reasoning

There are two common research approaches of reasoning, which are known as deductive and inductive (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The deductive approach is often associated with quantitative methods (testing theory). Researchers in deductive reasoning processes use a top-down approach driven by prior theories or hypotheses to test their validity (Bryman, 2012; Neuman, 2011; William M K Trochim,

Donnelly, & Arora, 2014). By contrast, the inductive approach is more exploratory and open-ended (building theory), and often associated with qualitative methods (Bryman, 2012). Researchers who employ inductive approach aim to develop and build theory from data obtained from the fieldwork using a bottom-up approach (Crotty, 1998; Patton, 2002). According to Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 83), it is “a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame”. The diagram below provides an illustration of the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning process.

Figure 4.1 Deductive and inductive reasoning process



Adapted from: (Bryman, 2012; William M K Trochim, Donnelly, & Arora, 2014)

Since the present study aims to advance our understanding of the nature of the Libyan networked public sphere, through exploring how technology was used and experienced over three critical phases, before, during and after the uprising, an inductive approach is more suited for the nature of this study than the deductive. Soiferman (2010) stated that proper selection of the research approach is highly dependent on the nature of the research arguments. He argued that “arguments based on experience or observation are best expressed inductively, while arguments based on laws, rules, or other widely accepted principles are best expressed deductively” (p. 3). However, although this study is deemed to be primarily inductive in orientation, one cannot ignore the impact of the pre-existing

theories in this research. It is important to acknowledge that in reality the distinction between deductive and inductive approaches can be vague because inductive reasoning can involve some deductive elements and vice versa (Bryman, A. & Bell, 2015). According to Gray (2014), existing theories and literature can have an impact on inductive research in terms of formulating the research problem and starting with an area of study. Duneier et al. (2002) in this respect also stated that the pure deductive or inductive approach does not exist because some questions are “brought to the site from the beginning”, while others are “discovered through various routes” (2002, p. 1566). However, what needs to be understood is that in inductive research, the researcher does not aim to confirm or refute theory. Rather, he/she seeks to make sense of the social world through establishing themes and patterns from the collected data (Shereier, 2012).

In this research, the existing theories and literature help to develop an understanding of the democratic potential of technology in order to address the research problem. As discussed in the literature and the theoretical framework chapter, much uncertainty still exists about the relationship between technology and society. Therefore, forming hypotheses through reviewing the existing body of literature would be an inappropriate plan, particularly in a dynamic, fast-changing environment such as Libya. Equally importantly, the exploratory nature of this study makes it more suited for following an inductive approach to analyse the collected data, to allow for new themes and patterns to emerge from analysis. According to Markham & Baym (2009), qualitative Internet research involves the “study of the multiple meanings and experiences that emerge around the Internet in a particular context. These meanings and experiences can relate to contexts of use (by individuals, organizations, networks, etc.) and/or to contexts of design and production processes” (p. 34). The researcher then has to inquire into those meanings and experiences to discover their importance.

4.4 Research methods

This section explains and seeks to justify the methods and techniques used to collect data for this research. According to Norris (2001, p.36), “research methods are better drawn from a variety of disciplines as no single methodology can hope to capture the rich complexities of life on the Internet”. In this research, therefore, multiple qualitative research techniques were adapted as part of a process of triangulation to provide a broader understanding of the research questions, and assure validity of claims and arguments. These

qualitative methods were: (1) semi-structured interviews; and (2) qualitative content analysis of selected Facebook pages.

Epistemologically, interviews can “give access to the manifold of local narratives embodied in storytelling and opens the way for a discourse and negotiation of meaning of the lived world” (Kvale, 2007). In research, there are three common types of interviews that can be adopted: unstructured, structured and semi-structured. The unstructured interview is essentially an informal type of conversation. The interviewer has only a list of issues to be covered, and the phrasing of questions can vary from interview to another. Therefore, it requires an experienced interviewer to remain on topic (Kvale, 2007). On the other hand, structured interviews tend to rely on prearranged questions and each participant is given the same set of questions in the same order (Bryman, 2012). By contrast to the previous two forms of interview, the semi-structured interview gives more freedom to researchers and participants because it has a tendency to be “fluid rather than rigid” (Yin, 2013, p. 110). The researcher conducting this type of interview usually has a list of questions to guide him/her during the course of the interview. This interview guide helps to make the interviews more “systematic” and “comprehensive”, while simultaneously offering an open, flexible process of conversation, allowing the interviewer to expand on certain questions or skip others (Bryman, 2012). The flexibility of conversation allows the interviewer to elaborate on issues related to a particular study while gaining in-depth understanding of the interviewee’s experience (Bryman, 2012). Among these three forms, in-depth semi structured interview is best suited for the exploratory nature of this study. Its open-ended questions enable the researcher to discover emerging themes related to how technology was experienced and used over the past few years in Libya.

The second method used in this research is qualitative content analysis of selected Facebook pages. Analysing Facebook data can provide a rich description of the phenomenon under study, especially in unique studies of this type. According to Riffe, Lacy, & Fico (2005), analysing social media data is important because it allows the researcher to analyse online messages posted in a natural environment by individuals of their own volition, unlike surveys where individuals may potentially employ selective memory or inaccurately report their uses or experiences (Smith, 2010). In this study, the triangulation of data collection techniques helped to gain in-depth insights into the topic under study. The following sections describe the process of data collection and analysis.

4.5 Data collection procedure

This section offers an explanation of the data collection procedure for both interviews and Facebook content, such as the rationale for selecting the study population, sampling and recruitment process, and difficulties and challenges faced while collecting the data.

4.5.1 Interviews

4.5.1.1 Rationale for choosing young people

A demographic bulge resulting in large numbers of young people was one of the characteristics common to the MENA region at the time of the 2011 uprisings, where young people between the ages of 15 and 29 made up around one-third of the population, and people under 30 made up about two-thirds of the population (Salem & Mourtada, 2011; USAID, 2011; Grim & Karim, 2011). In the UK, for example, the comparable figure of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 was about 12 per cent (Grim & Karim, 2011). During the Arab Uprisings, it was evident that young people participated in the protests in large numbers, and the events themselves have been dubbed “youth revolutions” (Bossio & Bebawi, 2012; Dahan, 2014; Cole, 2014; Abdalla, 2016). Studying young people, therefore, was highly relevant and helped to develop a focused area of research, particularly as the majority of social media users were young people (Salem & Mourtada, 2011). In Libya, for example, it was indicated that the majority of Libyans below 35 used the Internet daily in 2014 (Schäfer, 2015). The broad definition of youth used in this study includes anyone between 25 and 35 who has been a social media user, and was involved in one way or another in the 2011 events and the aftermath. The reason for choosing participants who at the time of data collection were no younger than 25 was to guarantee that they would be at least 18 years old when the revolution was occurring. Henceforth in this study it can be suggested that in 2011 the participants were mature, aware of their surroundings, and likely to be at the core of the revolution standing against or with the regime.

Young participants in this study was chosen from three different cities across Libya. Taking in consideration that Libya historically was divided into three provinces: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan (Bearman, 1986; Bell, Anthony & Witter, 2011), the study chose to recruit participants from the main cities of these three regions to allow the researcher to obtain a variety of ideas and views. These cities are Tripoli, the capital, which is located in the north west of Libya; Benghazi, which is located in the north east of Libya; and Sabha, located in the south. The researcher’s choice to recruit participants from different cities also fits with Fraser’s argument in relation to her understanding of egalitarian and multi-cultural

society to recruit participants. For her, an egalitarian and multi-cultural society is premised on the idea of plurality of public arenas that involve participation of a multiplicity of groups with diverse values and beliefs. As such, the study sample were considered a diverse representation.

4.5.1.2 Sampling procedure

The recruitment process began by contacting a number of young people through the personal network of the researcher. Two initial contacts were identified purposively in each city. The researcher took into account that these initial individuals were sufficiently diverse in terms of their political involvement so that the study did not include only a more politically active and engaged cohort. After deciding on this, the sampling proceeded through ‘snowball’ sampling. Bryman (2012) defines snowball sampling as a “technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristic relevant to the research” (p. 424). The reason behind choosing two initial contacts in each city was to form separate snowball samples in order to enhance the sample diversity, and avoid the risk of interviewing people who might have similar views or narratives. To further ensure diversity and inclusion in terms of gender, social class, geographic location, ethnicity (Arab or Berber) and political ideology, initial contacts were encouraged to recommend the study to more than just their closest acquaintances. Table 4.2 summarises the demographic features of the study sample.

In terms of sample size, Patton (2002, p. 242) argued that “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry”. However, there are many approaches can be used to decide on the sample size in qualitative research. Klenke (2008) recommends a sample size of 2 to 25 individuals. Similarly, Creswell (2007) suggests 5 to 25 participants for qualitative studies. Other scholars (Bowen, 2008; Mason, 2010) suggest that it is best that the researcher continue conducting interviews until data saturation is reached, meaning that new themes will stop emerging by further investigation. In this study, the later approach of data saturation was applied, that led to conducting 25 interviews.

Within the approach explained above, the researcher managed to recruit 25 young participants, consisting of (13) from Tripoli, (8) from Benghazi and (4) from Sabha. The sample is composed nearly equally of male (12) and female (13). Arabs constitute the majority of the sample (21), while Amazighs constitute a minority (4), which is reflective

of the country as a whole. In terms of political stance, the researcher managed to recruit (16) pro-revolutions, (6) anti-revolution and (3) uncertain. It is important to mention that participants' stance was associated to their opinion back in 2011 and many of them (mainly pro-revolution) have, to some degree, changed their opinion over time.

Table 4.2. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Participant	City	Gender	Ethnicity	Level of education ⁹	Political stance	Code
01	Tripoli	Female	Arab	Postgraduate education	Pro-revolution	(T-F-01-PRO)
02	Tripoli	Female	Amazigh	High school	Pro-revolution	(T-F-02-PRO)
03	Tripoli	Male	Arab	Diploma	Anti-revolution	(T-M-03-ANTI)
04	Tripoli	Male	Arab	Diploma	Pro-revolution	(T-M-04-PRO)
05	Tripoli	Female	Arab	Undergraduate education	Pro-revolution	(T-F-05-PRO)
06	Tripoli	Female	Arab	Master's degree	Uncertain	(T-F-06-UNC)
07	Benghazi	Male	Arab	Undergraduate education	Pro-revolution	(B-M-07-PRO)
08	Benghazi	Male	Arab	Master's degree	Pro-revolution	(B-M-08-PRO)
09	Sabha	Female	Arab	Master's degree	Pro-revolution	(S-F-09-PRO)
10	Benghazi	Female	Arab	Bachelor's degree	Pro-revolution	(B-F-10-PRO)
11	Benghazi	Female	Arab	Bachelor's degree	Anti-revolution	(B-F-11-ANTI)
12	Benghazi	Male	Arab	PhD	Pro-revolution	(B-M-12-PRO)
13	Benghazi	Female	Arab	Bachelor's degree	Pro-revolution	(B-F-13-PRO)
14	Tripoli	Male	Amazigh	Bachelor's degree	Pro-revolution	(T-M-14-PRO)
15	Tripoli	Male	Arab	Diploma	Pro-revolution	(T-M-15-PRO)
16	Tripoli	Male	Arab	Master's degree	Pro-revolution	(T-M-16-PRO)
17	Sabha	Female	Arab	Bachelor's degree	Pro-revolution	(S-F-17-PRO)
18	Tripoli	Male	Amazigh	Bachelor's degree	Pro-revolution	(T-M-18-PRO)
19	Tripoli	Male	Amazigh	High school	Pro-revolution	(T-M-19-PRO)
20	Sabha	Female	Arab	Bachelor's degree	Anti-revolution	(S-F-20-PRO)
21	Sabha	Male	Arab	Master's degree	Uncertain	(S-M-21-UNC)
22	Benghazi	Male	Arab	Bachelor's degree	Anti-revolution	(B-M-22-ANTI)
23	Tripoli	Female	Arab	Bachelor's degree	Anti-revolution	(T-F-23-ANTI)
24	Tripoli	Female	Arab	Master's degree	Anti-revolution	(T-F-24-ANTI)
25	Benghazi	Male	Arab	Bachelor's degree	Uncertain	(B-M-25-ANTI)

4.5.1.3 Recruitment difficulties

Although the nature of a snowball sample can help to provide a friendly and reliable environment for potential interviewees, recruiting process was very challenging due to:

- **Unwillingness and suspicion**

⁹ Education is compulsory from 6 to 15 years in Libya, and youth literacy rate was 99.9% in 2015 (Rose, 2015).

Although political topics have become ordinary conversations in everyday life in Libya after the revolution, suspicion towards the research and the sensitivity of the topic seemed to lead some potential interviewees to be reluctant in participating in the study. One of the potential contacts, for example, has blocked the researcher on Facebook after being invited to take part in this study, leaving a message saying that she does not understand politics. Another participant received the invitation but has never replied or provided an explanation, although he saw the invitation message. The very idea of doing academic research, specifically when mentioning signing the consent form, seemed to make the researcher a suspicious person for some potential participants. Within the increased deterioration in the security situation in the country, this behaviour was expected and understandable. However, it cost the researcher a lot of time and energy to overcome these obstacles and reach more participants.

- **Technical issues**

Technical issues were an inevitable result of the ongoing conflict. The violent clashes that erupted from time to time during the data collection, the electricity outages, the telecommunication infrastructure damage – factors that limited the internet connectivity, lead to delays in interview arrangements. For example, it was very difficult to recruit participants from Sabha city due to the frequent electricity cut off and poor telecommunication infrastructure in the city. The following section shed light on technical problems in more detail.

4.5.1.4 Skype as a tool for conducting interviews

Conducting the interviews while the conflict was going on was very challenging. In conflict zones, the situation is unpredictable, dynamic and unstable. Therefore, the researcher took into consideration ethics in practice, or situational ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) to build contingency plans for any unforeseen developments, e.g. difficulty in recruiting participants. According to Ellis (2007, p. 4), ethics in practice, or situational ethics deals with “the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field”. Initially, the plan for interviewing participants was to conduct interviews in person. During the time leading up to data collection, however, the deterioration in the security situation in the country required the need for new methodological and ethical considerations. After constantly monitoring the security situation and analysing risk,

specifically through listening to local information and news, it was decided to change the approach and conduct online interviews to reduce safety risks (Hanna, 2012).

Skype was the main medium used in the interviews. It enabled the researcher to conduct interviews over a long distance. According to O'Connor, Madge, Shaw, & Wellens (2011), online interviews can be valuable for researchers to communicate with participants, who may otherwise be difficult to reach, such as people living in isolated or dangerous places. It is also suggested that online interviews can be a beneficial forum for discussing sensitive topics. They can also allow for greater flexibility because interviews can take place during any time convenient for both the interviewer and interviewee. In online interviews, using video can also be an option. Video calling allows the researcher to not just talk to their interviewees but to see them in real time (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). In this study, however, it was not possible to use video calling in all interviews for two reasons. First, a number of participants did not give consent to use a video call (13 participants). Second, 'technical hitches' (P. Hanna, 2012) were experienced (e.g. the screen was frozen; call disconnection). Therefore, the audio and text options were used in order to continue the discussion or rearrange the call. One interview was re-arranged the next day due to an electricity cut-off that led to internet disconnection. In addition, three interviews were conducted over Facebook messenger due to the fact that participants were not on Skype.

4.5.1.5 Conducting the interviews

In this study, no pilot test policy was used. According to Van Teijlingen, Rennie, Hundley, & Graham (2001), although it might be useful to pilot the interview protocol before conducting the main study, there is also the possibility of making inaccurate assumptions or predictions on the basis of pilot data. In qualitative research, pilot studies are not necessary because "qualitative data collection and analysis is often progressive" (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001), meaning that a following interview in a series should be 'better' than the previous one as the researcher might have gained valuable insights from previous interviews which are used to improve the interview guide. In this study, it can be said that data collection was a learning process for the researcher. The order and structures of some questions were refined to invite more description and explanation. In addition, collecting the Facebook data before the interviews took place gave the researcher more insights into what to explore, refine and focus the interview questions. Although she was already familiar with the contested Libyan context, the nature of the Facebook discussion reflected an increased polarization and division within the Libyan society. This observation

led the researcher to be more mindful to probe interviewees' experiences and memories, and establish an understanding of their social media activities and patterns of use in relation to this issue.

The researcher was also mindful and took careful considerations in order to use balanced language with each participant, particularly when asking sensitive questions or mentioning the revolution. The reason for these considerations was to establish a friendly conversation climate during the interviews. For example, 'the revolution', 'the uprising', 'the civil war' and 'the 2011 events' were used interchangeably to refer to the Libyan uprising. To illustrate, if the interviewee was pro-regime, the researcher preferred to use 'the 2011 events' or 'the civil war' instead of 'the revolution', taking into account each participant's stance. However, despite these considerations, the researcher encountered one participant who was confrontational. Although the aim of the study was fully explained to him and consent was gained, he interrupted the flow of the questions and insulted the researcher, making it difficult to continue the discussion. Therefore, the researcher withdrew from the conversation and this incomplete interview was excluded from the analysis.

Interviews were conducted between August 2016 and February 2017. Taking more than six months was the inevitable result of the challenges and difficulties in recruiting and interviewing participants. However, the researcher successfully managed to interview twenty-five participants from different areas of the political spectrum and different locations across the country. Each participant was contacted informally via Skype or Facebook to explain the aim of the research and arrange a time. During the interview, the researcher began by introducing herself and briefly describing the purpose of the interview to refresh the participant's mind about the research project. All interviews were audio recorded, and conducted in Arabic language. The average interview duration was 60 minutes.

The interview questions were categorised into chronological order to discuss participants' experience in using technology over three critical phases: before, during and after the uprising. This chronological organization was important in order to capture any changes in how technology was used and experienced over time. Although most participants were able to speak about their experiences openly, some needed patience and considerable prompting to tell their stories. The researcher also showed her genuine interest in participants' experiences and stories at all times during the interview through concentrating, listening

carefully and asking follow up questions. The researcher ended the conversation when there were no more stories or topic to discuss. The decision to stop recruiting more participants was made when the theoretical saturation was reached. In other words, the additional data did not result in new themes or different ideas. The records were immediately transcribed after the interviews had been conducted. The transcription was made in Arabic and according to the principle outlined by both Chen & Boore (2010) and van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg (2010), translation was only performed for quotations to preserve original meaning where possible.

4.5.2 Facebook content

4.5.2.1 Rationale for selecting Facebook over other platforms

Facebook was chosen over other platforms due to its popularity in the country (Salem & Mourtada 2011). In December 2011, for example, Facebook statistics showed that penetration rates increased dramatically, demonstrating that Libya became the fastest growing country in terms of national Facebook users (Silverwood-Cope, 2011; Scott-Railton, 2011). After the revolution, the number of Facebook users continued to increase. Recently, Facebook reaches a far greater audience than it ever did at the time of the 2011 uprising, particularly among young people below 35 (Schäfer, 2015), driven by the growth of smartphones (Freedom House, 2015). According to Internet World Stats (2015), the number of Facebook subscribers reached around 2.4 million in 2015, up from 260,400 in 2010. This number continues to increase. In 2017, statistics showed that more than half of the country's population are on Facebook. More precisely, Facebook followers reached 3.5 million users (Internet World Stats, 2017). However, it is important to acknowledge that it could be difficult to confirm the actual number of users due to the possibility that users may have had more than one Facebook account. It is also important to admit that although this thesis focuses on young people, there was no absolute confirmation that the Facebook messages were posted by young people. In other words, it is difficult to verify users' personal information such as age and geolocations because they might not be real.

4.5.2.2 Sampling procedure

Identifying Facebook pages is a challenging process due to the fluid nature of the platform that allows for easy creation and disappearance of pages and groups. The initial plan for this study was to analyse content posted on the '*Day of Rage*' Facebook page, one of the popular pages that emerged during the revolution as a key focal point for anti-Gadaffi forces. However, this page had disappeared from Facebook for some reason. The

disappearance of *'Day of Rage'* reflects the high turnover of these Facebook pages. Previous research by SalahEldeen & Nelson (2012) titled *Losing My Revolution* demonstrated the fragility and fluidity of social media sites. By analysing six different event-centric dataset resources shared on social media between June 2009 and March 2012, they found an average of 27% lost after two and a half years of the Egyptian revolution. Issues such as removal of content by the authors, blocking users from the site or shutting down websites were suggested as possible reasons behind losing social media content.

Since this was the case with the *'Day of Rage'* Facebook page, a new strategy was adopted which involved a selection of a sample of the most popular public Facebook pages, where online discussion is mostly of a political nature. To obtain a deeper understanding of how Facebook was used by different groups, it was decided to purposely select pages with different stances, pro-revolutionary and anti-revolutionary. This allows for broader understanding of different publics and different spheres rather than limiting our understanding of the subject matter to a single group.

In order to select the Facebook pages, Socialbakers website (<http://www.socialbakers.com>) was used to identify the most popular political Facebook pages (pro- and anti-revolution) based on the number of followers they had. Accordingly, two pages were identified. First, LW Facebook page, which was known for its revolutionary stance, with 1,389,914 followers. Second, LI Facebook page, which was known for its anti-revolutionary stance, with 183805 followers. In order to confirm the choice of the study, a group of potential interview contacts were asked to nominate some Facebook pages that they were using or popular for political discussion. As a result, these two pages were named among others as popular political Facebook pages in Libya.

After deciding on this, these selected Facebook pages were anonymised for ethical purposes. After identifying the pages, the next step was to decide on time frame to extract relevant data. As the study focuses on exploring the nature of the emergent digital public sphere in Libya, and its evolution over time, the researcher decided to extract content at a specific time in each year between 2011-2016. It was purposely decided to coincide with the early days at which the uprising unfolded, followed by certain days of its anniversary in the following five years.

At this point, it was not clear yet how many days the researcher wanted to extract data from. However, it was important as an initial step to check the availability of content around the

targeted time because the popularity of the selected Facebook pages alone could not guarantee how active they were. The researcher, therefore, had to check the selected pages based on daily updates three days before the day of the revolution and three days after. By manually searching the timeline of each selected page, it was found that both pages had daily updates in the targeted time each year except in 2011. This was possibly because there were no messages posted in that time, or the messages were removed for some reason. Therefore, this study only examined the content around the first five anniversaries of the revolution (2012-2016). Focusing on the anniversaries was important because it allowed for a highly active period of time to be examined in which users could be expected to actively discuss political issues and reflect on the revolution and its aftermath.

4.5.2.3 Data extraction

After deciding on the time frame, the next step was to learn how to retrieve Facebook data. There are several software tools requiring no programming knowledge that can be used to collect social media data including, but not limiting to, Mozdeh, NVivo, Netlytic, NodeXL and DiscoverText (Ahmed, 2015). After undertaking an experiment to find out which software tools and APIs were capable of collecting historical data, DiscoverText, a cloud-based program, was chosen to be used in this study. DiscoverText is widely used in academic research by many scholars (e.g. Reilly & Trevisan, 2016; Edgerly, Thorson, Bighash, & Hannah, 2016; Ahemd, 2018). After conducting some experiments, the software was set up to collect data from the two selected Facebook pages over three days of each anniversary: the day of the revolution, the day before and the day after. The data collection took place in February 2016, and primarily consisted of 17,357 messages comprising posts and comments. These messages were exported into Excel for manual analysis. According to De Graaf & Van Der Vossen (2013), applying manual annotation is more likely to achieve a high level of validity than automated content analysis because the latter might make measurements noisy or misleading.

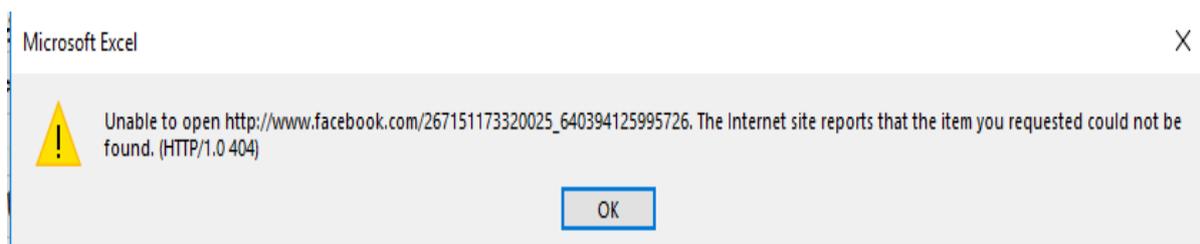
4.5.2.4 Data preparation difficulties

After downloading the Facebook data, the content was unintelligible in the Excel CSV formatted file. According to the DiscoverText support team, there can be an issue if the data is encoded in a language such as Arabic. Detailed instructions on how to make the spreadsheet data readable were given by the team. Full details of the instruction were published later, and can be found here under the DiscoverText FAQ section:

<https://texifter.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/216721048-Why-does-Facebook-data-collected-using-DiscoverText-look-unreadable-or-unintelligible-or-missing-in-the-Excel-CSV-formatted-file->

Having solved this issue, another technical challenge was faced. Microsoft Excel was unable to open some downloaded Facebook posts when clicking on the posted link to the message (see figure 4.2 below). However, when searching these posts, which were supposedly unavailable, using their downloaded caption text, most messages were still available on the Facebook site. In order to not miss important content or have gaps in the data, efforts to re-check/re-search these problematic posts were made manually. In other words, this means that the researcher did not depend solely on the software and did manual searches for corrupted data, although it was very time consuming.

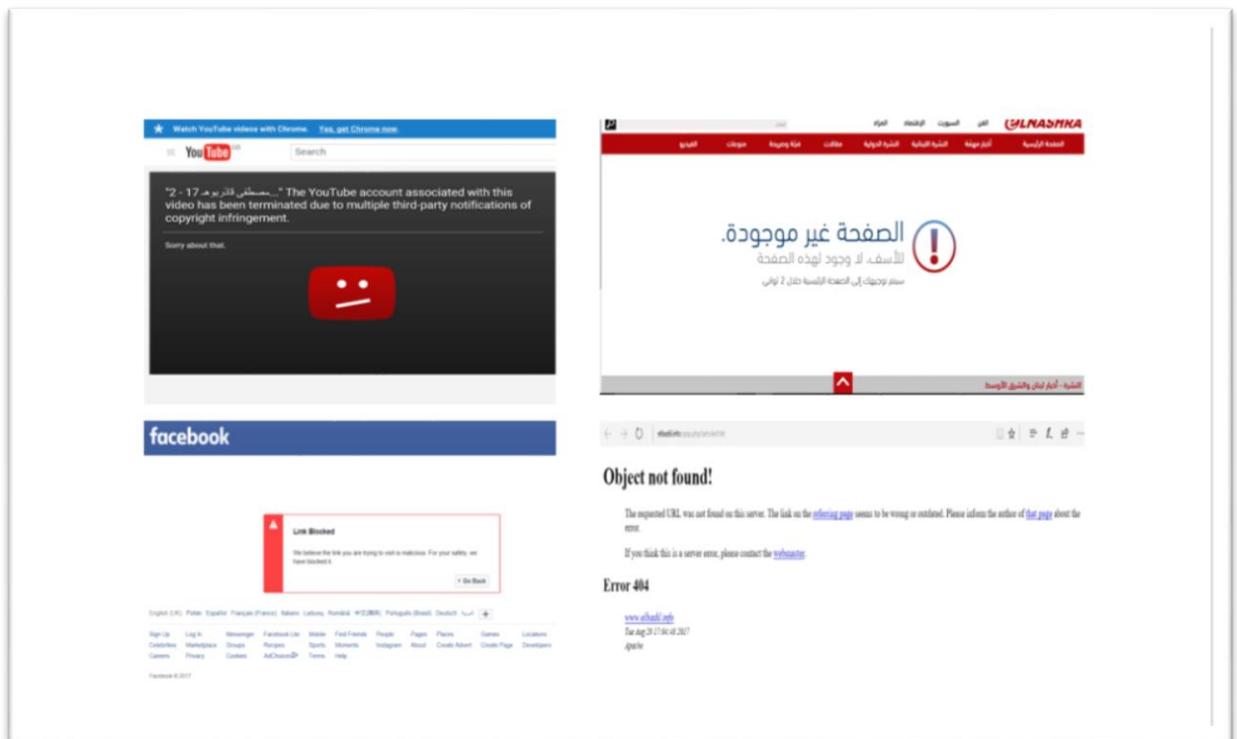
Figure 4.2. Screen shot of the unavailable Facebook items



The types of these problematic messages were mainly posts due to the fact that the majority of the data was text-based comments. According to Gerbaudo (2016) text-based messages are very important in social media, as being often the primary medium of expression makes this an important subject of study in its own right.

Of 17365 messages downloaded to Excel, only 130 items were unavailable, including messages that contained broken links and those where there was no text caption added to them, thus it was not possible to go back to find them. However, a decision was made to include messages in the analysis as long as they were still meaningful even though they included broken links, particularly if the message contained a text or description which conveyed a meaning of them. Of the 130 corrupted messages, only 38 messages were excluded and not coded. Accordingly, 17327 were retained for analysis.

Figure 4.3 Screen shot of the corrupted Facebook messages



4.6 Data analysis strategy

The purpose of analysing data in qualitative research is to make sense and generate meaning out of it (Merriam, 2009). To do so, the researcher has to develop meaningful themes and highlight important patterns as well as decide how to present them (Patton, 2002). In this study, data collection and analysis are conducted alongside one another, using two different approaches to generate themes and codes. First, thematic analysis approach, which was used to analyse the interview data. Second, content analysis approach, which was employed to analyse the Facebook data. The following sections explain the procedure followed in each approach to analyse the research data.

4.6.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is one of the most common means used to analyse qualitative interviews (Bryman, 2012). According to Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in rich detail” (p. 79). It is also considered by Alhojailan (2012) to be the most appropriate for “any study that seeks to discover using interpretations” (p. 10). Based on the above, the thematic approach was chosen to analyse the study interview

data. The model of Braun & Clarke (2006) which consists of six phases was implemented for this analysis.

4.6.1.1 Familiarization with the data

According to Braun & Clarke (2006), the step of data familiarization involves “transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas” (p. 87). In this study, after listening carefully to the interview record, the researcher transcribed the interviews personally into written form using Microsoft Word. By merely preparing and organizing collected data for examination, familiarity with the data increased and some analytic ideas and interests began to be formed. To further immerse in the data, the next step was to read and re-read the transcripts for initial ideas and thoughts. As a result, notes of emergent themes and patterns were taken and some initial codes were created.

4.6.1.2 Generation of initial codes

This phase involves “coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). To achieve this step, interview transcripts were entered into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package available freely through the University of Sheffield. However, after playing around with the software to create initial themes, it was found that NVivo does not operate as expected when using right to left languages such as Arabic. Therefore, the researcher turned to the old-fashioned method of manual coding using highlighter pen paper and pencil because: 1) other software tools that support Arabic language such as Atlas.ti were not freely available through the University of Sheffield; 2) the time it would take for the researcher to become capable in using this software would be lengthy. In addition, Blair (2015) argued that manual coding gives the researcher more control over the data, unlike a computer screen. By spreading out strips of paper and cards over a desk or a floor, the smaller pieces of the larger puzzle can be seen, thus links and connections are easy to make.

Having decided the coding approach, the process then began with open coding where key ideas are created inductively to allow data to speak for itself (Bryman, 2012). However, some insights from the literature review were used to come up with themes and ideas. In the initial stage of analysis, a set of 121 codes was first generated based on three selected interviews. The list of codes was then separated according to the chronological order of the three phases under the study: before, during and after the revolution. These codes were then

revised and checked in order to remove repetition and group overlapping codes. The coding process was iterative and continuous to produce meaningful themes. Notes were also taken to create links and connections between different ideas and concepts. After analysing the remaining transcripts, new codes emerged, some of which were more accurate and specific compared to the previous ones. At this stage, most of the codes were labelled with the corresponding time period as seen in the example in the table below.

Table 4.3. Example of data extracts, with codes applied

Data extract – the uprising period	Coded for
<p>فكانت لدي مناوئة في المستشفى وكنت احلم باننا احوة لنا نموت في بنغازي حجرة السجن من ليبيا حربي مع ليبيا .. وطيبة اخرى فقط نتكلم .. اما الباقي ولا كانه بسمعي فالواضح كان هناك خوف كبير .. والبعض الاخر يقول ان البلاد امن وامان ولا يوجد شيء .. ففقت بتوصيل الكمبيوتر بالشاشة الكبيرة وقلت لهم انظروا الفيديوات .. فكنت اواجه بالصمت .. وكنت اهين فيهم اهانات غير مباشرة وكان يعتبروني متمرد ومتهور منذ الماضي .. وتواصلنا مع الشباب وكان هناك نوع من الحركة في قشلوم وغيره مع الساعة الخامسة .. في تلك الفترة على الانترنت تواصلنا مع مهور عدة وبنين بطنجة بهذا الاسم .. كان حيث كان موجود في ماليزيا .. ومع بداية الثورة قاموا بتجهيز غرفة عمليات من ماليزيا لتوحيد القوى في العاصمة من الطاقات الشبابية الموجودة .. مثل المجموعات الموجودة في جنزور والهضبة وغوث الشعال وتاجوراء .. فبدانا بالتنسيق معه ونراقب ما يحدث في منطقة قشلوم حيث بدأت فيها الاحداث الاولى .. وهناك اسم هو اول من بدأ يتكلم واول شخص على صوته وتكلم وبدأ يقول في كلام عن التغيير</p>	<p>1- Finding out about the uprising using internet 2- Connecting with Libyans in exile through the internet to coordinate protests</p>
Data extract – post-uprising period	Coded for
<p>لان في ليبيا حسب الاحصائيات هناك 800 الف مشترك على الفيسبوك .. اخذت هذه الاحصائية من شركة البرج اللبني اردت شراء دعاية منهم .. لاننا حاولنا عمل دعاية لاكثر من برنامج مثل ملتقى الوراق الوطني الذي عقد في غريان ومصراته وطرابلس في 2015 .. فقمنا بمحاثة هذه الشركة لعمل اعلان فقالت ان عدد الليبيين 800 الف لبني الذي ستصلهم الدعاية بالكامل وكان قيمتها 2850 دينار لبني ..</p>	<p>1- Attempts to use social media as a tool of persuasion 2- Targeting political content at specific audiences</p>

4.6.1.3 Searching for themes

According to Braun & Clarke (2006), this phase “re-focuses the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes, involves sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes” (p. 89). To do this, different codes were combined or separated to form overarching themes, taking into account the chronological order of the three phases under the study, before, during and after the uprising. A constant comparison and reflection of the emerging themes was carried out to identify relationships between different codes and themes. By the end of this phase, a collection of initial themes and sub-themes were labelled with corresponding extracts of data. The main emerging themes were:

Pre-uprising period

1. Types of everyday online activities and political use.
2. Government surveillance.

During the uprising

1. Finding information on the uprising.
2. The fear barrier.
3. Government surveillance.
4. Information blockage.

Post-uprising

1. Social media as information portal and a tool for political activities.
2. Freedom of speech
3. Credibility of social media information.
4. Attitudes and opinions towards social media use.
5. Returning back to everyday social media activities.

4.6.1.4 Reviewing themes

The purpose of this stage according to Braun & Clarke (2006) is to “consider the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set, but also whether your candidate thematic map ‘accurately’ reflects the meanings evident in the data set as a whole” (p. 91). Therefore, the list of candidate themes created previously were refined and reworked. This refinement process included breaking down a few themes into separate themes, while organizing others under one theme. The outcome of this refinement process is presented below:

Understanding young people’s social media use before 2011

1. Social media, politics and everyday life.

Understanding young people’s social media use during revolutionary times

2. Finding out and communicating about the protests.
3. The fear barrier and social media access and use for protest purposes.
4. Government surveillance.
5. Information blockage.

Understanding young people’s social media use after the uprising

6. Social media, a newfound freedom of expression and a vibrant political environment.
7. Social media, misinformation and political polarisation.

4.6.1.5 Defining and naming themes

Having decided on satisfactory themes from the data, the researcher had to further define and refine themes by “identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92).

The first theme is about young participants’ everyday online practices and experiences prior to the uprising. It focuses mainly on to what extent social media was politically used, and to what extent the political environment was restricted.

The second theme is about how participants found out and communicated about the protests, before the internet was cut off. It presents participants’ experiences in using different sources of information ranging from old to new media.

The third theme, which was collapsed into three, describes different dynamics and levels of emotional intensity and how this motivated different participants to overcome the fear of government repression, while leading others to remain cautious and maintain the fear barrier.

The fourth theme is about government surveillance. It highlights how the government was adept in targeting those young activists who were likely to be influential in expanding the protests’ reach.

The fifth theme is about information blockage. This theme presented the old regime’s attempts to demobilise protestors by blocking information sources such as shutting down the internet, jamming satellite TV channels and interrupting telecommunication services. It also presented participants’ experiences and stories of how they responded and circumvented the government censorship.

The sixth theme describes how the social media landscape opened up suddenly in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime (late 2011-2014), revealing a vibrant political environment marked by different forms of political activities and practices.

The seventh theme describes how the vibrant political environment has devolved into an environment of conflict, chaos and confusion. It also describes a set of practices and dynamics that emerged in response to the country’s unsettling dynamics between 2014-2016.

4.6.1.6 Producing the report

This phase involves write-up of the report to provide “a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell within and across themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). The analysis was written using illustrative extracts to convey the story of the data in a way that convinced the reader of its merit and validity (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). Chapters five, six and seven are a presentation of the overall findings, whilst the broader theoretical view of this research is discussed in chapter eight.

4.6.2 Content analysis

Content analysis is a research technique that has been widely used in both quantitative and qualitative researches to investigate media content (Krippendorff, 2013), and to analyse political movements and activists’ internet use (Meikle, 2003; Harwood & Garry, 2003; Papacharissi, 2015). According to Hsieh & Shannon (2005), qualitative content analysis is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Conducting a qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to “pay attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of the meanings of the phenomenon rather than the statistical significance of the occurrence of particular texts or concepts” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 2). However, this definition does not mean that qualitative content analysis cannot include quantitative aspects. In fact, quantitative aspects such as frequencies of coded categories can also be analysed within a qualitative approach and an interpretive paradigm, which is important to capture common patterns and key trends of the phenomenon under the study (Mayring, 2000). Content analysis is also useful if the aim of applying it is to compare categories at different periods (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In light of these considerations, content analysis was best suited for examining the Facebook content in this study despite the many similarities between content and thematic analysis in qualitative studies (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

To ensure a high quality of content analysis, eight steps explained by Zhang & Wildemuth (2009) were followed. The first step is to prepare data for analysis in a way that fits researchers’ needs. This preparation step often includes organizing data manually or using a computer analysis program (e.g. NVivo, SPSS) to make it ready for analysis (see section 4.5.2.4 on data preparation). Following data preparation, the second step is to define the unit of analysis. According to Long (2011), the units of analysis may be the same as or

different from the unit of measurement/observation. To illustrate, communities, groups, organizations and individuals are often the units of analysis in qualitative studies, and then the researcher uses his/her methods to examine an aspect of that (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). In this study, since the scope was to explore the nature of the emergent networked public sphere in Libya, and its evolution over time, the timelines of the two selected Facebook pages were identified as the units of analysis. Individual posts and comments were served as the unit of examination, which were assigned to certain codes relevant to the study.

After deciding on the unit of analysis, the third step is to develop a coding scheme through generating categories inductively or deductively or both of these approaches. This study followed inductive reasoning to generate codes (see section 4.6.2.1). In step four, testing a sample of the developed codes is essential using an intercoding reliability test. Once a sufficient level of intercoding reliability is achieved, the coding scheme, therefore, can be applied to the entire corpus of data as a fifth step. The sixth step involves rechecking the consistency and reliability during the coding process, which is likely to lead to the creation of new codes (see section 4.6.2.2). At this stage, the coding process can also be accompanied by taking notes, which according to Myers (1999) is a useful way to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the collected data. For example, the researcher notes down potential emerging codes to be added to the coding scheme during data analysis, and also takes notes of the most interesting comments to be used as examples when presenting findings.

In step seven, the researcher starts making sense of the identified categories, finding links, and exploring common patterns and trends, before moving to the final step of reporting findings. To present findings in qualitative content analysis, the researcher uses selected examples from the data to provide readers greater depth of understanding of the emerging context. In this study, the selected examples were purposively chosen, attempting to present the most representative Facebook messages in relation to the asked research questions. According to Zhang & Wildemuth (2009), “samples for qualitative content analysis usually consist of purposively selected texts which can inform the research questions being investigated” (p. 2).

4.6.2.1 Coding strategy

The aim of the content analysis is to contribute to answering the second research question of this study:

To what extent has social media facilitated the emergence of a networked public sphere in Libya's post-uprising period: has it helped foster a more democratic environment?

As discussed in the literature, one of the most common critiques of Habermas' public sphere theory is that the ideal concept of the public sphere is centred on rationality rather than emotionality. While Habermas considers rational and critical public communication as a driving force for a functional public sphere, many scholars (e.g. Melucci, 1996; Gitlin, 2003; Mouffe, 2005; Jasper, 2011; Castells, 2012; Papacharissi & De Fatima Oliveira, 2012), acknowledge the importance of the emotional dimension of the public sphere. For them, emotions are deemed as being an important element in public life and political communication. In her recent book, Papacharissi (2015), for example, suggests that there is no pure cognitive or affective communication but that both elements are interconnected and overlapped. Based on her analysis of Twitter hashtags in relation to Hosni Mubarak's resignation and the Occupy movement, she demonstrated that "the practices of networked, affective publics present a departure from the rationally based deliberative protocols of public spheres and help us reimagine how we may define and understand civic discourse among networked crowds in a digital era" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 320).

In light of the above considerations, it is assumed that the Facebook content in this study cannot be entirely rational but will always be characterised by both cognitive and affective elements to varying degrees. During the data preparation phase, the emotional aspect was obvious and frequently represented in the data. Therefore, a decision was made to categorise the Facebook content based on the nature of the messages, broadly classified as either cognitive and/or affective, following a non-mutually exclusive approach. Breaking down the collected Facebook data into cognitive and emotional forms could provide a greater level of detail, and allow us to understand how rational or emotional the two Facebook pages are. More specifically, the following questions were posed in relation to the Facebook data:

- 1- How do users articulate their political views on Facebook in the post-revolutionary period? i.e. how rational are their discussions? Are their messages informational/emotional in nature? What are the dominant types of these messages?*

2- *Does posting behaviour differ between the two pages or change over time in terms of diversity and inclusivity? and how are different actors (admin vs users) using the platform?*

In order to answer these questions, the study relied on an inductive approach to generate sub-codes under the broad coding classification, allowing for new codes to emerge, and reducing the possibility of limiting or hiding any important issues. According to Hanna (2013), the field of social media has evolved so rapidly in a way that people's uses of these online platforms are changing simultaneously as researchers are developing approaches to study how they are being used. She also stated that "theoretical expectations about how people are using media are following rather than preceding data collection" (p. 369). Therefore, it was necessary to use a bottom-up approach to generate relevant codes. These codes were then grouped into four main themes. As mentioned above, the generated codes were not mutually exclusive. Methodologically, assigning a particular text to more than one category is allowed within qualitative content analysis approach (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Yet, the coding scheme should consist of codes' names, definitions and examples, in a way that maintains a high level of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of the definition of each category (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

4.6.2.2 Intercoding reliability

As outlined previously, one of the important steps during the coding process is assessing the coding consistency after developing an initial coding scheme. Therefore, a pilot test of intercoding reliability was conducted on a sample of 300 Facebook messages. According to Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Campanella Bracken (2002), "the appropriate sample size should not be less than 50 units or 10% of the full sample, and it rarely will need to be greater than 300 units" (p. 601). Once the sample was obtained, a second independent coder was trained to examine the messages in order to help achieve accurate measurement. The agreement between the two coders was 84.7%. Neuendorf (2002) states that a coefficient of .70 is considered reliable in some exploratory studies, while Joyce (2013) suggests a higher threshold of .80 or 80% for percent agreement in social science research. Cohen's Kappa test was 0.821 which is at a substantial level. According to Mayring (2000), Cohen's Kappa test is considered sufficient if it is over 0.7.

This process of assessment allowed the researcher to gain feedback on the coding scheme, which then improved, based on this process. For example, the disagreements between the coders mainly resulted from the overlap between some categories, mainly *Criticism* and

Anger. Disagreements were found to depend upon differences in opinion between the two coders, which were then resolved via discussion and consensus. Some definitions of certain categories were also improved and refined at this stage. Following this step, the coding scheme was applied to the entire corpus of data.

During the coding process, new codes and concepts emerged and needed to be added to the coding scheme. These new codes were *Distrust social media information* and *Sarcasm*. The updated coding scheme were checked iteratively. After coding the entire data (N=17327), 1732 randomly-selected Facebook messages¹⁰, which made up 10% of total sample size was coded by a second coder. An instruction sheet and the data to be coded was provided to the coder. The same process of the pilot test of intercoding reliability was followed. Agreement between the two coders was 86.8%, while Cohen's Kappa test was 0.847. Disagreement were resolved via discussion and consensus. Table 4.4 shows the final version of code book analysis with description and examples for each category.

Table 4.4. Code book for the analysis

Category	Description	Examples
Cognitive posts		
Information-related		
Giving information	The Facebook message contains factual or informational messages (e.g. announcement, leadership speeches, situational updates, reporting on events, first-hand information, media monitoring e.g. links to media sources such as online newspapers, blogs or websites)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I hear an aircraft flying over Tripoli now - Follow this link for the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's speech about Libya http://www.facebook.com/...
Requesting information	The Facebook message contains queries (e.g. asking for clarification, fact checking)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hi all! Updates needed. Your place and security situation Plz? - Did anyone else just hear that loud bang? My room windows rattled!
Opinion-related		
Posting criticism	The Facebook message expresses criticisms or complaints regarding specific ideology, group (e.g. rebels, militias, tribes, public figures, government)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This terrorist has no official position. Who gave him the right to make decision on our behalf?! - Today is the anniversary of the military coup led by NATO!
Distrust of social media information	The Facebook messages expresses doubts about the credibility of social media information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is a photoshopped photo! - I want to see a video of Saif-al-Islam otherwise I won't believe that he is still alive.
Stating an opinion	The Facebook message expresses a sort of balanced view or opinion (e.g. analysing the situation by defining a problem or suggesting possible solutions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yes, true. This important point. The government should be transparent about the 2013 expenditure.

¹⁰ Selecting the random message was through using the feature of data analysis Toolpack embedded in Excel

	or showing a willingness to discuss an issue with other users in a respectful manner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Look, I agree with you to some degree but I am against this political isolation law. It is just unfair and could create more chaos and division in the country.
Action-related		
Calling for action	The Facebook message includes calls for online or offline action (e.g. calls for protests, tactics and strategies, signing petition or changing profile picture)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Please vote! follow the link below: three years after the Libyan revolution, Is Libya better off? http://arabic.rt.com/... - Coordinators please write any possible target!
Emotional posts		
Emotion-related		
Concern	The Facebook message conveys a worried or nervous feeling about the instability in Libya (e.g. concerns about the security situation, the country's political or economic future problems)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Corruption is sweeping like we've never seen before! Don't know what will happen to us next! - It seems we will be soon reaching the stage of Iraqi situation oil-for-food...
Sarcasm	The Facebook message contains remarks to mock or convey contempt or humour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The better is yet to come! - NATO is gone dear rebels! You are fighting alone now haha
Solidarity	The Facebook message expresses solidarity and support for a certain ideology or group (e.g. pro- and anti-regime)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Libya free! Allahu Akbar - Jamahiriya forever!
Optimism	The Facebook message conveys a feeling of hope and confidence about the future, and emphasises the good parts of a situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We're all looking forward to the new Libya! - Good morning Libya! Good morning freedom! Good morning our bright future!
Sympathy	The Facebook message conveys understanding and care for someone else's suffering (e.g. displaced people, martyrs' families)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My heart aches when I see some people forced to flee their homes because of this civil war. - My thoughts with those martyrs' families.
Sadness	The Facebook message shows a feeling of sadness and frustration (e.g. photos of war, bloody scene)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The stones would cry out after seeing this photo. - How sad to see the revolution we fought for turned to be a symbol of everything negative! ☹
Anger	The Facebook message conveys a strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility (e.g. flames, insulting words, personal attacks, serious disagreements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is better to divide the country than living with someone like you! - It is really p***ed me off when they deny that there is no ISIS... idiots!
Words of comfort (expressions)	The Facebook messages conveys peaceful expressions, or includes words to ease feelings of distress (e.g. prayers, calls for peace)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Everything will be fine InshaAllah. - May Allah bring us together. Amen!
Other	The Facebook message conveys ambiguous meaning or irrelevant comments (off-topic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a good restaurant near this place. - Follow us on this page for the best footwear brands https://www.facebook.com/...

4.7 Ethical consideration

This section outlines considerations regarding ethics that preceded the design and implementation of the study for both interviews and Facebook data analysis. Since research involves working with human subjects, ethical principles must be considered (Bryman,

2012). As mentioned previously, the researcher applied ‘situational ethics’ (Ellis, 2007), which resulted in building contingency plans for any unanticipated problems with data collection and analysis, taking into consideration their ethical implications in relation to all stages of the research. These plans and strategies for both interviews and Facebook data analysis were checked and then approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Sheffield on 14/09/2015. The ethics policy of the University of Sheffield provided guidance and advice on key aspects on every aspect of research involving human participants.

4.7.1 Ethical issues in interviews

Since this study dealt with vulnerable groups, conducting interviews in person was laden with many ethical dilemmas. First, discussing such a sensitive topic would likely be problematic if no private venue was found to conduct the interview in. Public places would be very risky and uncomfortable for participants to talk about their personal experience and political views. Second, the frequent armed clashes that erupted across the country during the time leading to data collection made it difficult to conduct interviews in person. Third, as the researcher is from Tripoli and she has never been to Benghazi and Sabha, travelling around unfamiliar places might be very dangerous particularly with the increase of fake checkpoints that were set up for different reasons (e.g. kidnapping/murdering civilians, stealing vehicles, etc.). This unpredictable and highly risky environment required the need for bearing responsibilities to people who would be involved in this research, including the researcher herself. Therefore, the plan was shifted and a decision was made to conduct online interviews to reduce the risks (Hanna, 2012). According to O’Connor & Madge (2001: 11.2), online interviews might be helpful to conduct interviews with vulnerable groups because they can function as an “anonymous, safe and non-threatening environment”.

To make participants aware of their rights, a Study Information Sheet and a consent form were sent to each participant, either via email or social media channels. Participants were not asked to sign the consent forms in their real names but were asked to use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. However, prior to each interview, oral consent was also obtained and a summary about the study was explained due to the fact that some participants were delayed in viewing the forms or returning their consent because of internet connection issues. Interviewees were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interview at any point.

Attempts were also made to ensure that no emotional harm came to study participants by pacing the interview so that topics emerged gradually during the interview, while offering them rest breaks if needed. The material was not disclosed to anyone other than the researcher. The responses were uploaded immediately to the Google Drive of the University of Sheffield once the interviews were conducted. To further ensure the anonymity of participants, codes were used when reporting quotations in the findings. These codes include information about the city, gender, a simple serial number and the participant's political stance such as (T-M-18-PRO). In this instance *T* stands for Tripoli, *M* for male, *18* the serial number and *pro* for pro-revolution stance.

4.7.2 Ethical issues in Facebook data analysis

It is important to note that the question of whether social media data is considered public is currently an area of debate (Beninger et al., 2014; Reilly & Trevisan, 2016). The blurring of boundaries between private and public in the online spaces, or as Baym & boyd (2012) called it, a 'context collapse', raises important ethical concerns. Therefore, different ethical guidelines were reviewed and considered before conducting this research, including but not limited to *the University of Sheffield Ethics Policy*, *AOIR Association of Internet Researchers* and *the British Psychology Society*. Accordingly, the present study took the stance that Facebook data can be considered public, where entry is without any form of barrier. As stated in the *Research Ethics Policy Note no. 4 of the University of Sheffield*, it may be possible to use social media data without consent - when the material is already in the public domain. Therefore, informed consent was not sought. Alternatively, *a medium-cloaked approach* towards data anonymization was employed (Kozinets, 2010; Reilly & Trevisan, 2016). This approach entails paraphrasing online messages of unaware users to protect their privacy and avoid disclosing personally identifiable information.

Due to the fact that the Facebook data came in Arabic language, the quoted examples were translated into English, with a little paraphrasing in a way that retained the meaning. To further ensure that these examples could not lead to the identification of their authors, the second coder was asked to translate the examples back into Arabic, which resulted in content that was different enough so as not to be searchable. Furthermore, these examples were not assigned to their authors so that they could not be traced back to them. Instead, they were presented using codes. These codes were designed to distinguish between years and the two selected Facebook pages in which these messages originated. This description

is to make clear to the reader how the Libyan emergent networked public sphere has evolved over time in relation to different groups.

An example of these codes which are stated at the end of each quoted message in findings is as follows: “*finally we smell the freedom*” (LI123/12). The LI stands for the name of the anti-revolutionary page, 123 refers to the number of the cell in Excel where the messages were downloaded, and 12 refers to the year in which the message originated. The decision to anonymise the name of the Facebook pages was taken during the time of writing in 2018 because one of the pages disappeared from Facebook. According to Bryman (2012), “ethical issues arise at a variety of stages in social research” (p. 130). For further privacy protection, the researcher decided to anonymise the name of these two selected Facebook pages, taking also into account users’ ‘right to be forgotten’ (Sarikakis & Winter, 2017). Finally, it is important to note that the extracted Facebook data was kept on a secure password-protected laptop, and saved on the University of Sheffield Google Drive.

4.8 Research quality

The criteria for assessing quality of quantitative research differs from that applied in qualitative research due to differences in nature between the two approaches. In quantitative studies, validity and reliability are important concepts used to address the quality of research. The term ‘validity’ is concerned with the question of whether the study reflects the claims that are supposed to be examined and measured, while reliability is associated with the question of whether the data processing is accurate and thus results are repeatable (Bryman, 2012).

In qualitative research, there is a lack of consensus on standards for assessing quality of research (Creswell, 2007). However, various methods and strategies have been suggested by many scholars to ensure trustworthiness and quality of research. Neuman (2011) suggests that the researcher needs to gather “rich” data to prove that the study findings are valid and accurate. Patton (1990) considers that the measurement instrument in qualitative research is the researcher himself/herself. Hence, validity in qualitative research depends on how skilful, careful and competent the researcher is in conducting research. Lincoln & Guba (1986) propose alternative criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research, including *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*. In pursuit of a trustworthy study, these factors were used to assess the current work.

Credibility seeks to evaluate whether the research findings are believable and plausible (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To achieve that, the study adopted a triangulation of data collection techniques to derive qualitative understanding. Many findings were supported by evidence obtained from both the interviews and the Facebook analysis to assure validity of claims and arguments. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2011) the combination of multiple methods can help to gain a broader, richer and holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

To further ensure credibility of the research process, regular meetings with supervisors were maintained which worked as peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), in which the processes of data collection and analysis were discussed and reviewed in a way that helped to secure a balance of data interpretation. According to Bolak (1996), “while a foreign researcher runs the risk of being culture blind, an indigenous researcher runs the risk of being blinded by the familiar” (p. 109). However, although the researcher, as a Libyan, experienced the intense moments of the revolution and its aftermath that may have shaped her thinking in certain ways, she successfully created enough distance between herself and her own culture while conducting this research. According to literature on indigenous research, distancing oneself from a familiar environment, particularly in terms of location, helps to maintain native researchers’ objectivity (Bolak, 1996). Being outside Libya for four years away from her own culture and site helped to maintain the researcher’s reflexivity. Moreover, through conducting a thorough literature review, and attending different conferences and academic events, the researcher was exposed to different perspectives that allowed for conducting more insightful research and balanced representation of alternative viewpoints. Therefore, it can be said that the researcher balanced an insider/outsider position (Sherif, 2001).

Transferability (generalisability) seeks to evaluate whether the research findings are applicable or transferable elsewhere to a similar context or setting. According to Tracy (2010), providing a thick description can achieve transferability. The researcher who aims to generalise qualitative findings has to make a clear description of the context, process and assumptions of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The richness of the descriptions offers the basis for others to judge the transferability of the findings to other settings (Bryman, 2012).

In this study, the overall general characteristics of the study participants, illustrations of the settings, study challenges and the research process were given to enable others to judge the

transferability of findings. Based on the aforementioned, it can be said that the findings of this study, to some extent, are transferable to similar contexts. More specifically, the findings might well be mirrored within similar societies that have similar characteristics (e.g. tribal and regional division) and are going through a conflict (e.g. political struggle or social movement).

Dependability seeks to evaluate whether the research findings are consistent and could be repeated if the same procedures were followed. To achieve this, Lincoln & Guba (1986) suggest that the researcher needs to reflect on the study through adopting an ‘auditing’ approach. This approach includes a step-by-step record of documents and evidence of each phase of the research process. During this study, the researcher kept complete records of different materials such as ethical approval, participant information sheet, information consent, interviews records and transcriptions, Facebook raw data, notes of intercoding reliability process, the study challenges and reflexive notes.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the credibility of study findings can be confirmed by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). According to Shenton (2004), it is important “as far as possible that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (p. 72). To improve confirmability, the researcher documented the procedures and activities for each phase of study. The researcher also reflected on this throughout the process and describes this in the analysis. The arguments in this study were related to and contrasted with previous theories and concepts in this area. The audit strategy described above was also a crucial technique for establishing confirmability.

4.9 Chapter summary

This study adopts an interpretative qualitative methodology relying on a combination of in-depth interviews and Facebook content analysis. The combination of both digital and non-digital data offers a broader understanding of the phenomenon studied from different angles. Justification and rationale for adopting a multiple qualitative methods approach, and relevant decisions made as the study progressed, were fully explained. Data analysis procedures were also discussed and justified. Challenges faced this research in terms of data collection and ethical issues were explicitly described. To achieve research quality, empirical data was regularly reviewed and criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were followed.

Chapter 5: Social media use before and during the uprising

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the interview data collected in 2016/2017. It is organised chronologically into two main sections: Section 5.2 presents young participants' everyday online practices and experiences prior to the uprising, focusing mainly on to what extent social media was politically used, and to what extent the political environment was restricted. Section 5.3 demonstrates how social media was used and experienced during the 2011 uprising, and how the regime responded to it. The aim is to gain insight into how young people revolted in a repressed environment and whether social media facilitated their action against the old regime.

5.2 Understanding young people's social media use before 2011

In 2009, Libya was named as one of the “worst of the worst” of the most repressive regimes in the world by Freedom House, together with countries including, but not limited to, Burma, North Korea, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan (Freedom House, 2009). These countries received the lowest rating of 7 on the Freedom House survey in terms of both political rights and civil liberties. In the light of this intense repression, it was essential to gain in-depth understanding, based on real experience of young people, of what social media has been used for, and how they used it in such a repressed environment. Findings are presented in the following sections.

5.2.1 Social media, politics and everyday life

As discussed in Chapter 2, internet was first introduced in Libya in 1998 and became available to the public in 2000 (Freedom House, 2015). The majority of participants (n=21) started their use of internet and social media in different times after 2003; only a minority of them started earlier at some time between 2000 and 2002 (n=4). Initially, most participants accessed the internet from computers in their homes, workplaces and internet cafés. After the introduction of wireless network services (WiMax) in 2009 (Freedom House, 2015), most participants reported that they started to access the internet mainly from home. Between 2003-2009, internet forums and blogs were the most popular platforms among many participants, before the uptake of Facebook from 2009 onward. Throughout this time, young participants used the internet and social media mainly for sharing information and knowledge, socialising, entertainment and simply hanging out but very rarely for politics. Only a small number of participants engaged in some sort of political

activities. The nature of these activities and why the majority did not engage in any online political activities is discussed in the following sub-sections.

5.2.1.1 Fear of government repression and self-censorship

One of the most reported reasons for deterring many participants from discussing politics on social media was the fear of government repression. When asked whether they were involved in any sort of political discussion, e.g. government criticism, the majority of participants gave a decisive answer such as:

“Of course not!” (B-F-11-ANTI)

“Are you kidding? I never shared my political views on social media” (T-F-06-UNC)

“Who wants to face any troubles with the government! I only shared my personal opinion with my trusted circle of friends or family” (T-F-02-PRO)

These extracts suggest how fear of government repression permeated deep into Libyan society. This fear barrier led many to widely practise self-censorship and refrain from voicing their views. The majority preferred to stay in their safe zone and avoided confrontation with authorities. All of this seemed to, over time, translate into participants largely maintaining a state of apathy and indifference in terms of confronting authorities or engaging in any sort of political activism. This feeling can be exemplified by the following comment:

“I had never thought of action against the regime. Even if someone wanted to, there was no way of doing that. The country was tightly controlled by the regime and you would be simply put in jail. So what is the point? I wasn’t concerned to be honest. It didn’t even occur to my mind. I think it was something built up unconsciously over time. The regime was like an accepted fact or destiny that someone can’t change. I even didn’t expect that the 2011 protests would result in removing the regime” (B-F-10-PRO)

This quote above clearly demonstrates a sense of disempowerment and how this participant became resigned to a lack of agency.

While some participants (n=12) felt disempowered, others (n=4) reported that they were not really aware of democratic values. For example, one participant said that:

“Well, these buzzwords such as freedom of speech, social justice and citizens’ rights were new to me and I think for a lot of us. I was not sure of what these concepts really meant when I first heard them on media outlets during the uprising. Before that, I just hoped for a better standard of living. That is all” (T-F-1-PRO)

This lack of understanding of such democratic values further emphasised how the regime controlled the flow of information. This restricted information environment led perhaps to limit some people’s political knowledge and their imagination of liberal democratic values.

From another perspective, a number participants did not believe in the principles of Western democracy (these were mainly pro-Gaddafi participants). For them, the regime system was sufficient and democratic enough, unlike what is happening in Libya today as the country tries to apply Western democracy. They mainly believed in the regime’s unique system of “direct democracy”. This system was based on elected executive people’s committees responsible to legislative people’s congresses at the national, regional and local levels. Talking further about this issue, one participant commented:

“Political process had to be subjected to rules and principles rather than opening the door for ordinary people to discuss politics on social media. The leader Gaddafi provided us with this unique system. Anybody was able to participate and discuss political issues through it. This is the right place for political deliberations, not on social media. Political process must be something monitored. Otherwise it would become a mess. You can compare between Gaddafi’s style of democracy and this new democracy imported from the West. Look at Libya today; you can see clearly the difference!” (S-F-20-ANTI)

Despite these different opinions and experiences, there was a small group of participants (n=7), mainly pro-revolution, who used the internet and social media to seek information outside the realm of the regime. Their experiences and practices are presented below.

5.2.1.2 Attempts to overcome the fear barrier

As mentioned above, discussing politics and expressing personal opinions was uncommon among most of the study participants. However, there was a number of eager participants (n=7) who sought political information and news that was not available in the mainstream media. They mainly used opposition websites for accessing uncensored information. This does not mean that they did not fear the regime but their desire for knowing and exploring

alternatives seemed to be stronger. One participant commented on his experience in using these websites. He said:

“Well, I can’t say I did not fear the government but as a young person I was curious to know about everything happening behind the scenes. So, I tried a few times to browse opposition websites looking for information and news. I was cautious in the beginning but when nothing happened, I continued using them normally. However, I didn’t add any comments. I was just browsing” (T-M-16-PRO)

Despite the risks, it is interesting to see how this participant continued to browse opposition websites to look for different news. He was mainly driven by his curiosity and desire to know and explore new ideas and information. Although such a passive act might be considered easy or simple now, it could be seen in that time as significant because it might have created new opportunities for people, and helped them to dismantle the governmental barriers set up against flow of information. Thus, it could be considered as a first step towards enabling Libya’s closed public sphere to open up.

The internet and social media are very important means to access uncensored information in a repressive environment. Take for example the following story:

“Well, in 2007, I worked at a cybercafé in Tripoli as a manager. It was a popular one. One of my clients grabbed my attention because he tended to visit the place frequently to use the internet. As a manager, I was able to monitor and take control of my clients from the server. So, I monitored his activities and found that he was browsing websites I had never come across before. They were mainly opposition websites. He sometimes used a proxy to access but sometimes not. I asked around and I found out that he had been jailed many times by the regime because of his opposition. I tried to pretend that I didn’t know anything and dealt with him as a normal client. However, he opened my eyes to something new and since then I started to use these websites until the time of the revolution. The most discussed topics on these websites were about the government officials’ corruption, the poor development of Libya compared to its huge oil revenues, concerns related to the succession plan of Saif al-Islam, son of Gaddafi, comparing Libya under Gaddafi with Libya under the royal rule” (T-M-18-PRO)

This quote above further reflects on the importance of the internet in providing greater opportunity for publics to access different information and ideas outside the realm of the regime. It also shows that opposition websites were, to some degree, accessible and reachable for those who were eager and brave enough to find out uncensored news.

Yet, while the above participants were passively browsing and reading through political information and news, others (n=4) used social media in a more active manner, such as posting personal expression and discussing public concerns. However, although they attempted to criticise particular government practices, they had never reached the level of direct criticism of the regime itself. They also posted anonymously rather than using their real identities. The following participant narrated her experience on how she used her blog for self-expression:

“I mainly used my blog for personal expression. It was mainly blogging about general topics but I tried sometimes to provoke argument. I criticised certain government practices but it was kind of light criticism. For example, I wrote a blog post about the education system in Libya and how the system should teach innovation and creativity, rather than memorisation and conformity. In another blog post, I went beyond this to write about Al-Gaddafi’s trip to a certain city. I didn’t mention his name but I talked implicitly about how this city was cleaned up and prepared for welcoming him within only 24 hours. I was angry why this kind of service was only associated with his trip. I wanted better services and infrastructure in the country. My mom knew about this blog post. So, she cut the internet wire to prevent me from using the internet. She was afraid that I might get myself in trouble because of my online activities” (T-F-05-PRO)

Caring families who did not want their children to get into trouble were something also mentioned by another participant who narrated:

“I used to hear my family talking and criticising the regime. I also heard some stories of people who opposed him [Gaddafi], and how he reacted to that. The only thing I was told in that time when they were talking in my presence was not to repeat what I’ve heard to anyone. However, once I learned how to use the internet, I created a blog and starting blogging about different subjects. I used to log into some opposition websites and re-edit their news articles and re-post them. It was mainly copied from the Libya Today website. It was based in London and it was not really

against the regime. It had a kind of moderate position. So I did not really do something very risky. However, my family did not know about this blog. Otherwise they would have stopped me from blogging” (B-M-07-PRO)

What is interesting about these two examples is the different generational tendency, and how younger generations seemed to be more willing to take a step forward in order to share their views and express personal opinions. This willingness may be the result of how the internet has become increasingly an integral part of young people’s lives that opens a window on the world. For example, this participant (B-M-07-PRO) further commented on how the internet broadened his horizons and kept him connected to the world through reading, writing, and interacting with others. This point here sheds light on the importance of the internet in creating an interconnected world through exposing people to diversity of ideas and thoughts even though their environment is closed and restricted. Internet and social media in the Libyan context seemed to contribute to some degree into opening up the public sphere, and thus, it might have given young people the vision to demand change.

Unlike the above individual experiences, a couple of participants talked about their experiences in pushing the boundaries of acceptable discourse by establishing an internet forum for young people to use it as a platform for self-expression. Their story was as follows:

“We were university students in that time when we decided to establish our forum. We wanted to create a space where we could exchange knowledge and information. The forum had many sections that could attract many people such as sports, literature, social, tech, health, and even politics. However, our discussion on politics was limited. I can say it was light criticism for some government practices such as officials’ corruption. It was a successful forum and it had thousands of followers. Some ideas emerged from this online forum, and translated into projects. It was mainly voluntary work and charity. A charity organisation emerged via this forum. As young people, we were very motivated to achieve something and feel that we are effective in our society. The aim was simply to do some useful activities and participate somehow in improving the country. However, once our forum became popular and gained more and more followers, the government paid attention to us.

We were invited by Tripoli University Revolutionary Headquarters¹¹, and they talked to us. After that, they allowed us to continue what we were doing, but we were warned against criticising the regime itself” (T-M-15-PRO)

Although there was a limited opening due to the reformist scheme of the ‘Libya al-Ghad’ project which was introduced by Saif al-Islam Al-Gaddafi in the late 2000s, the culture of civil society work barely existed in Libya. Civil society organisations were only created under state supervision during the regime era (UNDP, 2015). Therefore, these young people’s activities seemed to be seen as threatening signs to the government. Thus, they had to be monitored and included under the government’s umbrella.

However, despite these restrictions, what is interesting is how these networked young people reoriented themselves from passive participants to potential subjects in the absence of democratic governance and political freedoms. Although their attempts were not truly free, pushing towards breaking some taboos such as opening up a path towards the development of civil society was significant. It reflects a sense of collective agency to make changes within the constraints of the regime structure. These young people showed responsiveness, capacity and willingness to turn their thoughts into visible action, utilizing the limited room of freedom allowed by the government.

5.2.1.3 Summary

The above discussion reveals a tight control of the government over its citizens’ political and civic participation. Young people’s online practices tended to focus on general topics such as literature and entertainment but not politics. Although there were a few attempts to challenge the government control through using social media to seek alternatives, these attempts were limited and in some cases monitored. Self-censorship remained widely practised for fear of government repression.

5.3 Understanding young people’s social media use during revolutionary times

This section presents young participants’ experiences of using social media during the revolutionary times. It begins with reporting how participants heard about and participated in the protests. It is followed by an exploration of key motives and drivers that potentially

¹¹ A unit that is a part of the Revolutionary Committee which operate within university to monitor staff and students’ ideas in case that they oppose the regime

led participants to break/maintain the fear of government repression. Finally, it discusses government surveillance and censorship, and how participants used different methods to circumvent the state control over old and new media.

5.3.1 Finding out and communicating about the protests

To obtain more understanding of participants' experiences and stories, it was important to research the methods by which they heard and communicated about the uprising. Many (n=19) said that they first learned about it through appeals and calls posted on Facebook that asked people to protest against the regime on 17th of February. A number of them stated that they came across these calls for protests while they were navigating online news on the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. The *'Day of Rage'* Facebook page was the most commonly reported page where participants followed the calls for protests. As one participant said:

"I was following the news on Tunisia and Egypt when I came across the 'Day of Rage' Facebook page. I read the calls for the uprising there" (T-M-03-ANTI)

Finding information and news through social media demonstrates its importance as a vital channel of information distribution. These online platforms allowed information to travel easily across geographical boundaries. Although the *'Day of Rage'* Facebook page was created by Libyans living in exile, participants who were inside the country were able to navigate its content. Not only that, but its content also reached people who were not social media users. As one participant commented:

"I heard from some friends that there were online appeals calling Libyans to take the street on 17 February. At that time, I didn't even know what Facebook was. I had never had a Facebook account before. I was an internet user but I was only using it for pleasure. So, with some help from my friends, I created a Facebook account and started searching for news and updates" (T-M-14-PRO)

This quote shows the significance of social media not only in crossing geographical boundaries but in crossing boundaries between online and offline worlds. Despite the government surveillance, Facebook interrupted the state's control over the flow of information, and the news posted on it reached even those who were, at some point, non-Facebook users.

However, once the protests were triggered, participants reported that they used a varied range of methods to gather information and news. In general, sources ranged from traditional (e.g. TV, mobile phones, and face-to-face communication) to new media (e.g. Facebook & YouTube). Participants used every method available to them to understand what was going on. For example, one participant commented:

“Look, I used many sources such as Facebook, TV channels, mainly Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia. I also got information from my friends and family or at work. Actually from everybody” (S-F-09-PRO)

Exploring in more detail, Facebook was one of the most important source for a number of participants (n=19) to find out breaking news in the early days. They argued that Facebook provided them fast and timely materials on the events on the ground compared to other sources of information. As one participant commented:

“On the first day of the protests, I received a message from my friend who lives in Benghazi. He sent me a photo of a small group of people protesting. It was not that clear because it was taken from behind and it was at night. I even didn’t believe him until I saw a YouTube video of the same protest on Al-Jazeera on the following day. You know, who dares to protest against the regime?” (T-M-6-UNC)

It is interesting to see how this participant doubted the photo of these protests until it appeared on an official channel such as Al-Jazeera. In this way, Al-Jazeera TV did not only help the protestors to reach a wider audience, but also it gave them credibility. This understanding might underline the point that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964) because in this case it seems that it was the medium that shaped and controlled the extent of this participant’s association and action. As different media wax and wane in importance over time, it seems that different publics might have been constituted via different media.

Al-Jazeera’s news, for some participants, was even better than other online sources. One participant commented on Al-Jazeera coverage:

“I don’t think that Al-Jazeera left room for other forms of social media. There was a live broadcast, reports and analysis regarding the situation in Libya. Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia offered 24-hour coverage over the course of the revolution. They were extensively broadcasting” (T-F-06-UNC)

Al-Jazeera, in fact, served as one of the most popular channels for information and news among many participants, regardless of participants' political stance. Both those pro- and against the regime followed Al-Jazeera to find out updates and news.

Watching TV channels was an essential source of information for all interviewees because Facebook seemed to be blocked by the government in the early days of the uprising. Participants reported that they had difficulties in accessing Facebook. However, some of them managed to bypass the government's censorship and were able to use Facebook. Interestingly, one participant reported that he copied information and learned how to unblock Facebook from his online network while he was following the Egyptian revolution.

“Well, during the Egyptian revolution, I saw some posts on how to use certain software tools to unblock Facebook. So, I copied them just in case the same thing happened in Libya. So I could be ready” (T-M-16-PRO)

Some other participants (n=4) found another way to communicate. They mainly used Yahoo messenger to connect with others. As one interviewee commented:

“Yahoo messenger was my alternative option to communicate with friends and to know the latest updates. I also was told that Yahoo messenger was safer than Facebook and the government could not apply surveillance over it. I am not sure about that but this is what I have been told. I did not really get much information but it was mostly to make sure that my friends were fine and safe. You know in that time the telecommunication services got worse as the revolution progressed” (T-F-02-PRO)

In the early days of the uprising, several participants (19) stated that they contacted their friends or relatives over mobile phone to obtain updates on the events and make sure that they were safe. However, the government also interrupted mobile network services to control the flow of information. Nonetheless, participants moved to using landlines to make calls to check on others, particularly their relatives or friends who were near trouble spots. For instance, one interviewee commented:

“I am from Sabha so I was contacting my friends in Benghazi and Tripoli over the phone almost every day to check on them and to find out what was going on. Then it became difficult to get through” (S-F-09-PRO)

Another participant used it differently. She said:

“I used to call my relatives on the landline phone to exchange Al-Jazeera satellite frequencies. You know it was jammed many times so we had to update the frequency each time. When I called my relative or she called me, we tried to exchange the information in implicit ways, so that if the government was spying on phone calls, we would not grab its attention. For example, we did not mention the name of Al-Jazeera. We just exchanged the satellite frequency. You know my relative lives in the same area but you know in that time we only went out in cases of emergency. So this was the easiest way to communicate with her” (T-F-01-PRO)

Participants also exchanged information and updates through word of mouth and face-to-face interactions. This form of communication was less risky, as described by one interviewee. She said:

“I was meeting my friends at the university on a daily basis. We were discussing the situation and sharing views and information. This is safer than speaking on a mobile phone. So, no one from the government could spy on us” (T-F-01-PRO)

Overall, participants tended to rely on different sources for information about the protests. These sources, as discussed above, varied between new and old media. Both types of media were equally important. The findings also show an interesting dynamic between the government and citizens. Each time the government tried to control the flow of information, the citizens responded and tried to keep the flow of information free.

5.3.2 The fear barrier and social media access and use for protest purposes

This section highlights participants’ stories and their motives in overcoming the fear of government repression in the early days of the uprising. On the whole, pro-revolution participants demonstrated that they were motivated and inspired by revolutions in the neighbouring countries Tunisia and Egypt. However, the degree to which the fear barrier was overcome varied, as discussed below.

5.3.2.1 Breaking the fear barrier

In the early days of the uprising, several pro-revolution participants (n=11) seemed to overcome the fear barrier created by the state. They reported that they were posting on social media to show their solidarity with and support for the revolution. For example, one participant recalled a statement she posted on her Facebook wall saying:

“Friday in Tunisia, Friday in Egypt and someone wants to cancel Friday in Libya!”
(S-F-17-PRO)

Friday is a special day of worship for Muslims, known as Jumu'ah, but during the Arab Spring it turned into a day of protest. In this post, it is clear how the participant was influenced by the revolutions in the neighbouring countries, and wanted Libya to follow suit and challenge the government repression.

However, looking back at this juncture of time, some participants thought that they were hasty and emotionally driven. For example, one interviewee, in his accounts of the events, said that he posted heavily on Facebook because he did not expect serious consequences. Instead, he believed there would be a quick end to the regime, similar to what happened in Tunisia and Egypt.

“I was so enthusiastic. I even posted under my real name. I thought it would take only a few days like the neighbouring countries. At most, I was expecting the firing of tear gas and water cannons, but not live bullets!” (T-M-16-PRO)

This quote above reflected an interesting affective-cognitive dynamic. The enthusiasm and excitement seems to overcome a more balanced assessment.

Similarly, this enthusiastic sentiment was also evident in another interview. One participant recalled her intense feelings at that point in time. She said:

“I posted a lot in the first week on Facebook. For example, I remember I posted ‘we are going to take to the street and participate in the protests’. In that moment, I was so enthusiastic because the moment I was waiting for eventually came. I didn’t even think of the consequences. It was our chance to get rid of the regime” (T-F-05-PRO)

Another participant was also keen to seek political change. Although this participant came from a wealthy family, he emphasised that the grievances of other people motivated him to support the revolution. This participant expressed his feelings at that time by saying:

“I thought the wind of change was blowing and people finally could get their rights. I thought that the wealth of oil in Libya finally could be used for improving the country. When the Libyan revolution broke out, I was extremely enthusiastic. Yes,

we feared the regime of course but it was moments which are hard to describe. It was like a fear mixed with enthusiasm” (B-M-08-PRO)

This quote further emphasised how the affective dynamic relates to the reasoning process to drive action. Although people feared the regime, at the same time they decided to challenge it and participated in the revolution in one way or another.

In fact, the time leading up to the Libyan revolution was intense. During the events in neighbouring countries, a few participants (n=4) recalled how they had been provoked by sarcastic comments circulated on Facebook by Tunisians during the Egyptian revolution. To illustrate, some of these comments included insulting language against Libyan youth for not having the courage to protest against the regime. As one participant reported:

“I remember one comment written by a Tunisian guy. It says ‘keep bending your body and burying your head in the sand, we want to see the men in Egypt’. So this made us angry and discontent. So if they were able to protest their regime, we also could do it. When the Libyan revolution started, we responded to them online saying ‘mind your own business; we bent our body just because we were lacing up our running shoes’. We wanted to prove to them that we were brave enough and we were simply getting ready for our huge anti-regime protests” (T-M-15-PRO)

This quote is interesting because it sheds light on how publics in the neighbouring countries were competing, and how social media helped in the diffusion of emotions that perhaps facilitated the revolutionary contagion process. The gendered aspect seemed to intensify young Libyans feeling and promoting their actions. They were put under pressure in a way that it would be a shame or stigma if they did not rise up against the regime similar to their peers in Tunisia and Egypt. This gives us insights on political masculinities as agents of change.

Social media seemed to be powerful in intensifying people’s feelings and driving their actions particularly if it included highly stimulating content. In the early days of the uprisings, there was a common video shared on different types of media. This video showed people, believed to be regime forces and mercenaries, entering homes in Benghazi to arrest protestors, while the video was captured by a woman who was screaming in the background. Several participants recalled this video, and how it created different feelings of fear, solidarity and confusion. As one participant commented:

“When I saw this video and heard the woman screaming, I felt I had to do something. I felt we should support people in Benghazi. So every Friday after prayers, my friend and I tended to drive around Tripoli looking for any protests on the ground to join them. I joined two protests but they were small ones and people quickly left for fear of government” (T-M-19-PRO)

This quote provides another example of how people could be mobilized through affective content. User-generated content seemed to foster people’s connection with one another and brought them together despite geographical distance.

Besides this emotional aspect of content, participants reported another interesting factor that helped to mobilise people against the government. Libya’s history emerged as an important factor to drive the events, specifically in the east of Libya. To illustrate, King Idris, the monarch Gaddafi overthrew in 1969, belonged to Cyrenaica province, whereas Gaddafi belonged to Tripolitania province. Therefore, many people in the east of Libya wanted power to return back to their province. The following quote further explains this issue.

“Well, as you know, many people in eastern Libya have a strong connection to the past. They are proud of that time of history when King Idris was ruling Libya. After Gaddafi came to power, they felt marginalized. So once the revolution sparked, they supported it strongly” (B-M-12-PRO)

The history of Libya, before the unification of the three provinces Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan to establish the Kingdom of Libya in 1951, came to the surface, provoking people’s emotions towards the 2011 events.

To conclude, this section has identified a number of examples with different affective dynamics motivating people to overcome the fear barrier. These included, but were not restricted to, enthusiasm and excitement to remove the regime, emotional online content, emasculation in the eyes of other Arab nations, a sense of injustice, nostalgia to the monarchy’s era and geographical marginalisation. These reasons triggered strong and complex emotions that influenced their actions online and offline.

5.3.2.2 Restoring the fear barrier

While the fear barrier seemed to dissolve rapidly in the early days, it did not take long for people’s anxieties and wariness to return. The climate of self-censorship and fear of

government returned very quickly. One participant, for example, became increasingly alarmed and her fears returned shortly after the uprising took a violent direction. She stopped posting on Facebook. She only read and followed passively without interacting with others. This participant commented:

“I stopped posting against the regime because I felt so scared. The situation started to evolve very quickly and turned to become very serious. It turned from peaceful protests to a real war between both sides, the regime and the rebels. I only monitored my Facebook news feed without even ‘liking’ anything” (S-F-17-PRO)

Another participant reported that his family forced him to stop any online activities that showed his solidarity with the revolution. Therefore, he had to delete every message he posted on Facebook to support the revolution. Instead, he started to ‘like’ pro-regime Facebook pages as a camouflage for his real intention. He elaborated:

“Some of my relatives contacted my father after he saw my Facebook posts. My father was angry with me and he told me to stop posting and be accountable to my family. So I had to be obedient and responsible to my family. To be honest, I myself felt scared later on because as I told you I posted under my real name” (T-M-16-PRO)

However, there was a tension between responsibility to family and responsibility to the uprising. This participant negotiated that tension and returned back to practise online activities once he got a secure internet connection. He reported that his friend, with sufficient equipment, was able to create an internet satellite connection that allowed them to post more safely and securely.

As seen in this section, the fear of government repression dropped in the early days of the revolution. There was much enthusiasm and hope to remove the regime. Participants were inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and wanted to follow suit. However, the revolution in Libya took a different path from the neighbouring countries. It turned out to be a violent revolution. Therefore, once the events became more violent, fears returned and participants’ online activities were influenced. While some stopped posting messages of solidarity with the revolution, others moved to use more secure internet to avoid government censorship, demonstrating a sense of agency and determination to achieve their goal.

5.3.2.3 Maintaining the fear barrier

While some participants were caught up by the moment, and tried to challenge the regime in some ways, others remained cautious (n=6). They feared the regime, while simultaneously were uncertain and confused about what was going on. Therefore, they continued practicing self-censorship. For example, one interviewee said:

“It was a scary situation. It was confusing. I even didn’t know who I should support. It was not good idea to post or protest against the regime in that time. If I did, so what? Get arrested or maybe killed? What did you expect from a regime seeing itself collapsing?” (T-M-04-PRO)

This shows how fear and confusion led this participant into inaction. This participant avoided engaging in any sort of action that might bring unwanted consequences.

Another participant also shared a similar view of avoiding taking any risks. He said:

“okay well, my friends suggested to join some secret online groups where there were some people trying to organise protests. However, I never joined because I didn’t trust them. What if it was a trap set by the regime? You never know” (T-M-19-PRO)

This participant believed that interacting with acquaintances or anonymous users online could risk his personal safety and his family’s safety if he was identified.

In this serious evolving political situation, participants’ responses suggest that online spaces were seen as an unsafe environment. Therefore, some remained as watchers of the situation only and avoided any sort of confrontation with authorities online or offline.

Regarding the pro-regime participants, they did not engage in much activity. Although all had Facebook accounts, the majority watched the news of the protests on TV. Only one of them used social media actively to show support and solidarity with the regime. For example, one pro-regime participant stated that she engaged in many online discussions on Facebook, trying to discourage people from protesting against the regime. The main message she tried to deliver to others was:

“Yes, I wanted them to understand that it was simply a conspiracy by the West. It was clear from the first day but some people thought it was a real revolution. I had discussions and even fights with many people including my friends who supported

the revolution. They didn't understand. They believed Al-Jazeera lies instead! I wished that the regime had shut down Facebook from the first day” (B-F-11-ANTI)

Although the regime did not shut down Facebook from the first day, extensive surveillance and censorship was applied. The following section presents a number of stories and analysis regarding the regime's surveillance.

5.3.3 Government surveillance

The findings revealed details of extensive surveillance undertaken by the regime to prevent the protests from growing and expanding. Since the government could not trace everybody with a revolutionary stance, activists were often targeted for repression and surveillance. For example, one interviewee narrated:

“I knew someone who was arrested by the government. He was arrested because he was an administrator of a popular Facebook page. He did not even use his page to support the revolution. It was a precautionary step to stave off the expansion of the protests. He was also interviewed by the Libyan state TV channel to make him show his opposition to the revolution. So that he might have an impact on people who followed his page” (T-M-16-PRO)

This example suggests that the government understood the importance role of social media and how it might facilitate anti-government protests. Therefore, it took proactive steps to prevent any potential activities that might have threatened the regime and destabilised the country.

Another participant stated his own story about being arrested by the government. He was one of the moderators of the forum mentioned earlier in this study whose activities were monitored by the government. Reciting his own story, this participant said:

“On the forum, we decided to raise the ceiling of liberties. In the very early days of the protests, we posted on the forum that ‘the Libyan blood is a red line’ to show our solidarity with protestors in the east of Libya. Some of the forum members were against us and posted messages of solidarity with the regime but we removed them. In the work place, I talked with my colleagues and showed my opposition to the regime. However, the majority feared talking publicly and avoided me. I tried with my friends to organise protests in Tripoli. We had a friend who was a student abroad. We gave him a list of our names so that in case we were arrested by the

government he could give it to Human Rights Watch. On 17th February, my friends and I met in my house and we planned some activities. However, the day after, I went to my work and I was arrested there. I was arrested on 18th February 2011. Of course they took my laptop and looked through my social media accounts. They tried to contact my friends but my friends were aware of my arrest. So, they started deleting everything they posted on the forum which might be used as evidence against me or them. They were also smart enough to change the domain of the forum. So they prevented the regime intelligence team from logging into it. However, later on the internet was cut off anyway. I was released on 24th August 2011 after the rebels entered Tripoli” (T-M-18-PRO)

The story above clearly illustrates how strongly the regime was trying to control the situation and cut off any opportunities to use internet and social media against the regime. The government was adept in targeting those young activists who were likely to be influential in expanding the protests’ reach. The government did not only arrest potential activists but went further to block the internet in order to control the flow of information. The following section discusses this point in more detail.

5.3.4 Information blockage

This section further discusses the old regime’s attempts to demobilise protestors by blocking information sources; for example, shutting down the internet, jamming satellite TV channels and interrupting telecommunication services. The regime tried to isolate people to prevent the protests expanding. Participants’ experiences and stories of how they responded and circumvented the government censorship to disseminate their message are presented below.

5.3.4.1 Circumvention of internet censorship

The internet was cut off by the government on March 3, two weeks after the outbreak of the uprising. After a month of effort, the internet services were restored in Benghazi, and later in Misurata in June 2011. Restoring the internet was a co-operative effort between many actors such as the U.A.E, Qatar and the Libyan-American telecommunications executive to provide services to some opposition-held areas (Scott-Railton, 2011). This suggests that numerous networks were outside the government’s control. As one interviewee described:

“When the internet was restored, we shared a lot of messages of solidarity on Facebook. I even posted first-hand information that came from the frontline. My relative was there and he used to call us via mobile phone and provide us with the latest news. When I got any news from him, I directly posted it on Facebook to share with others” (B-F-10-PRO)

This quote shows how people were actively conveying critical information at a crucial place and moment, which was probably inaccessible for professional journalists in those early days. Young people became citizen journalists, recording and disseminating information. This example not only shows the importance of the internet in disseminating first-hand information but also shows an interesting mechanism of how information travelled between different types of media. The integration between old and new media facilitated information distribution by the revolutionaries. The information travelled from the frontline where the battles between the regime and rebels took place to reach a wider audience on the internet. This example also reflects on the importance of personal networks such as family and relatives in enabling the dissemination of information.

In another instance, personal networks also appeared to be very important. A Benghazi-based participant reported that his friend, who was living abroad, topped up Skype credits for them. This was to help interested people contact regional and international media outlets. Here he explained:

“My relative who lives in the UK was topping up Skype credits for us. So that we could contact TV channels such as Al-Jazeera or other TV channels and tell them what was going on. He did this many times. They also helped in other activities such as delivering medical aid” (B-M-12-PRO)

This example above shed light on the important role that the Libyan diaspora played during the uprising in helping people inside the country and providing them with aid and assistance.

According to the interviewees, the Libyan diaspora also played an important role in providing people in Benghazi and other opposition-controlled areas with digital equipment to connect to the internet such as the two-way internet satellite and Thuraya satellite phone. They also facilitated connection between locals and foreign journalists, translating news

into different languages, thereby creating a global public sphere. As one participant commented:

“Libyans who were living abroad returned to Benghazi during the events. They provided us with the necessary digital equipment and translated the news to international media outlets. They also collaborated with us to establish media centres. I was working in the media centre in Benghazi which was located next to the courtyard where people used to gather and protest against the regime. So this centre was then like a hub to collect information and news regarding the revolution and publish it, then distribute it either to TV channels or journalists or post it online” (B-M-08-PRO)

In addition to these centres, cybercafés were another option opening up to people in Benghazi during the uprising. This was in late June according to this interviewee:

“As I remember, cybercafés re-opened in Benghazi around June 2011. Some of my friends who did not have an internet connection at home used to go there to access the internet to look for information or just to show their solidarity to the revolution” (B-F-13-PRO)

These examples above suggest that although the regime shut down the internet, some people were able to re-connect and support the revolutionary cause.

However, unlike Benghazi, the internet remained shut down in the regime-controlled areas such as Tripoli and Sabha. Only a small number of participants reported that they were able to re-establish internet connectivity through the two-way internet satellite. For example, one participant commented:

“I was working at a foreign company based in Tripoli. Because of the bad internet connection, the company was using two-way internet satellite even before the uprising. So when the events started and the regime cut off the internet, we were still able to log on to the internet. I used to log in through VPN¹² for more security to protect myself. I captured some photos from the protests in the early days and later photos of the regime checkpoints, some things like that, and uploaded them

¹² Virtual private networks (VPNs)—a technical means that can change where one’s device appears to be located.

online. This lasted until May I think when the regime came to the company to shut the internet down” (T-M-15-PRO)

Another participant commented:

“Well, I used to go to my neighbour. He was logging on via internet satellite. He was downloading videos about the events in hot spots such as Benghazi and Misurata. He then gave them to us on a hard disk to watch them at home” (S-F-17-PRO)

This example shows an interesting mechanism regarding how information flowed across the online and offline world through personal networks and strong ties. Even some of those who did not maintain an internet connection were able to watch online materials such as videos and photos. All they needed were adequate skills and enough equipment, e.g. a hard disk and computer, to watch original content and follow updates that might have been different from the edited mass media materials.

Another participant, an employee of Libya’s internet provider Libya Telecom & Technology company (LTT), reported different dynamics and ways to seek and distribute information. Describing his own experience, he narrated:

“I am an LTT employee. The internet was available in the company even though it was cut off around the country for a short period of time. What the government did in the beginning was to cut off Libya from the outside world. So, the internet slowed down and was cut off in some places. Anyway, we maintained the internet inside the company. However, I couldn’t do a lot because we were monitored. However, I downloaded some videos on CDs to give them to people I knew or I simply threw them away on the street so, people could pick them up and watch the videos” (T-M-15-PRO)

Similarly, the same approach was used by another interviewee. With his friends, he distributed materials on CDs and also flyers:

“A friend of mine was able to build an internet satellite. I am not sure how he did that but he was skilful enough to do so. After that, we started downloading videos and pictures on CDs or USBs. Then we disseminated them by throwing them on the streets or gave them to other trusted friends. All CDs and other materials were

picked up because we passed by the same areas in the morning and we found nothing” (T-M-16-PRO)

This quotation again shows how young people invented innovative ways to use technologies for their purposes, making efforts to keep people informed and connected.

Besides distributing information this way, this participant stated that he and his friends were also creating content. They produced a number of videos in order to mobilize people and support their revolutionary cause. These videos included:

“[...] photos from some areas in Tripoli that were in bad condition. So we collected these photos and added some sad music to them so we could influence public opinion. Then when they were ready we just uploaded them to YouTube” (T-M-16-PRO)

This example demonstrated that pro-revolution participants created propaganda to support their cause. This propaganda was the result of well-planned strategy with a clear aim to mobilise public opinion against the regime. Young people introduced innovative ways for creating information that might have attracted further attention to their revolutionary cause.

In another instance, a young participant used the two-way internet satellite for coordinating activities. He mainly helped to provide humanitarian aid for Libyans who fled from their homes to the border between Libya and Tunisia because of the armed clashes. This participant commented:

“This was around June in 2011, the number of people on the border increased. I was in Tripoli and I used internet satellite to communicate with my friends who had already left for Tunisia. They were assessing the situation over there and passed me information. I in turn tried to contact people who could offer them help such as food and money and so on. I myself left for Tunisia in July because the amount of work increased and more people were needed to help” (T-M-14-PRO)

Unlike these relatively active participants, there was another participant who was less active due to some constraints. Because of the frequent electricity cut offs in Sabha during the uprising, this participant used what is called a Skygrabber, an offline satellite internet downloader, to follow the news and updates about places where action was taking place. Although this method was a ‘one-to-many’ way of communication (because it only allowed

for receiving rather than sending content), it was an effective means to keep this participant connected and informed of what was going on. He elaborated:

“Okay what I did was to set up my laptop using Skygrabber software. So, my computer could catch data through the signal of the nearest internet satellite. This software only allows you to receive data. So you don’t know what the content of the files is until you open them. However, I found this method very useful and adequate at that time. I watched a lot of news and videos regarding the events. For example, I watched some video clips captured in Misurata city, where the major battles took place between the rebels and the regime forces” (S-M-21-UNC)

Although this participant did not interact with others, this method helped him to be conversant to some extent with what was happening despite the geographical distance.

While some pro-revolution participants tried to circumvent the internet censorship, pro-regime participants did not report any attempts to do so. As narrated by some pro-revolutionary participant, the regime established what was called the ‘Electronic Army team’ in order to fight back the revolutionary propaganda by portraying the revolution as a conspiracy against Libya, and warning about its consequences such as a tribal/civil war and the spread of Al-Qaeda. It was also reported that the regime set up Facebook pages to broadcast images and videos about rebels’ wrongdoings and misconducts during the clashes.

To summarise, it would seem that the government's decision to block the internet was not entirely successful. Of course it prevented many people from using digital tools but some people were able to reconnect and circumvent the government censorship. This was through the help of some actors ranging from countries to individuals. The two-way internet satellite in particular provided a great opportunity for some people to bypass the internet blackout, allowing them to challenge the government’s control over the flow of information.

5.3.4.2 Traditional communication tools

Traditional communication methods were very important for a big segment of Libyan society. As discussed in the literature the internet penetration rate was low in Libya at the time of the uprising. In the following example, one participant shed light on the digital divide particularly in rural areas. He explained:

“In 2011, when I went back to my home town in the mountains, a group of young men came to visit us in the media center in Nalut city. They came only to find out what Facebook was. They had no idea about this online tool. The main medium for them was TV” (T-M-14-PRO)

This quote highlights the problem of digital inequalities in terms of access, usage and skills in the country.

As for the study participants themselves, traditional ways of interactions were important for both those who maintained internet connection and those who did not. The most important traditional way of interaction among participants was TV channels and face-to-face interactions. Participants’ stories and experiences of connecting and conversing with one other through these traditional ways are discussed below.

- **TV channels as a source of information**

According to all participants, TV channels were reported to be the most dominant source of information during revolutionary times. The most reported channels that participants watched were Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Libya Al-Ahrar¹³ and the Libyan State Television. The first three channels supported the revolutionary cause while the latter was the voice of the regime. As mentioned earlier, the Al-Jazeera channel in particular was interrupted and jammed due to its heavy coverage during the uprising. However, despite the interruption of the channel, many participants (n=16) reported that they were able to retune the Al-Jazeera broadcast frequency and continue watching it. Al-Jazeera was a source for different types of content ranging from reports, talk shows, and live broadcasting to user-generated content. Al-Jazeera picked up many user-generated videos and re-broadcast them on its TV channels. As one participant said:

“Al-Jazeera broadcasted many videos. For example, the one I clearly remember was a video showing a group of young people raising a huge rebel flag in Tripoli. It was sometime around May. You know it was very motivating when you see a video like this taken from inside Tripoli where checkpoints were everywhere. You feel that there were some people who were brave and able to do something for the revolution. The video then showed the police removing the flag” (T-F-01-PRO)

¹³ Libya Al-Ahrar is a Libyan channel founded in late March 2011 by a Libyan expatriate and based in Doha, Qatar.

Although this participant had no internet access at that time, she was able to watch online content on TV. Al-Jazeera as such played a crucial role in bridging the online and offline world. Broadcasting such videos on Al-Jazeera brought the rebels' actions to the public attention and gave them more visibility.

However, despite the importance of Al-Jazeera as a key source of information, its reliability was questioned by many interviewees including those with a revolutionary stance. Surprisingly, some of them (n=4) admitted that they were aware that Al-Jazeera carried false information during the uprising. One pro-revolution participant narrated:

“I remember that Al-Jazeera reported breaking news saying that there was an air strike by the regime forces on Hai Alandalus in Tripoli. I live nearby and I didn't hear the sound of the attack. So, I went with my friends to the named place to check but there was nothing. However, I did not stop watching Al-Jazeera. You know TV channels were the only source left for us when the internet cut off, and of course I cannot say that all Al-Jazeera information was incorrect” (T-M-05-PRO)

This story about the regime air strikes was also narrated by another interviewee but set in a different area in Tripoli. This, therefore, raises the question about the credibility of Al-Jazeera, and whether this was deliberately done to sow confusion and mobilize more people against the regime.

While some pro-revolution participants questioned the reliability of information circulated on Al-Jazeera, pro-regime participants were unanimous in the view that Al-Jazeera spread misleading and false information. They also blamed it for inciting strife among Libyans. Many of them recalled the following chant which was used heavily during the solidarity marches with the regime:

“Oh Al-Jazeera is dirty, our leader but no one else” (T-M-24-ANTI)

This participant's opinion of Al-Jazeera was as follows:

“I was watching Al-Jazeera not because it was a trustworthy channel but to see how they were spreading lies and rumours to people. It was disgusting. It was clear from the beginning that their aim was to serve the Qatari agenda to remove the regime” (T-M-24-ANTI)

Pro-regime participants mainly watched the Libyan State Television. This channel was the voice for the regime against the revolutionary propaganda. Through daily talk shows, the regime tried to portray the revolution as a conspiracy against Libya, framing NATO interference as an imperialist attack. Participants also recalled how these talk shows were characterised by recurrent warnings about consequences of the revolution and how it could lead the country into a dark tunnel of tribal/civil war and religious extremism.

- **Face-to-face conversation**

Face-to-face conversation was another means by which participants communicated and exchanged information. This mainly was from the ‘street’. Street means having conversations with people in the neighbourhood, workplace, cafes, mosques (Masjid مسجد) and public spaces. As one interviewee commented:

“I was meeting daily with my friends in the mosque. After the prayer, we discussed and shared what we knew with each other. Not only in the mosque but also in the workplace as well. Oh yes we also get our news from people we didn’t know before. For example, people we met at petrol stations. You know during the uprising, we queued in long lines to fill up our car tanks. So, people felt bored from waiting and started conversations with others” (T-M-04-PRO)

This way of finding out information and communicating with people while doing other activities such as praying or queuing at petrol stations resembles what Fisher, Landry, & Naumer (2007) called ‘information grounds’. Information grounds are environments temporarily created when people go to a place for a certain reason but they start a conversation that might foster the unplanned and accidental sharing of information.

However, some participants (n=6) went purposely to find out information in some public places. Similar to Tahrir square in Egypt, Court yard (also known as Almahkama Court as it is adjacent to the Court) and Maydan al Shajara were major gathering places for publics. In these places, the latest news and updates were exchanged. One participant narrated:

“Well, in Almahkama Court, information from the ground was immediately broadcast on the platform. This platform was the site for all information and news regarding the revolution. It was a hub of different activities. Not only for knowing what was going on, but also it served as a platform for expressions of solidarity like songs, poems and speeches. It also served as a reliable network for directing

resources and providing the logistical support for rebels in hot spots” (B-M-08-PRO)

Similar to Benghazi, publics gathered also in Tripoli but mainly to support the regime. The two main public spaces, the Martyrs' Square (Arabic: ميدان الشهداء known as Green Square (الساحة الخضراء), a landmark of downtown Tripoli, and Bab al-Azizia (Arabic: باب العزيزية), a military barracks and compound that served as the main base for Muammar Gaddafi, were also spaces for showing solidarity and support. There was also a live broadcast from these places on the Libyan State Television. One pro-Gaddafi participant reported:

“Yes I went to the Green Square with my family during the uprising. It was a quick visit but I felt so good when I saw that many people supporting the regime” (T-F-24-ANTI)

While these public gatherings took place inside the country, Libyans also gathered outside Libya. A few participants reported that they left for Tunisia either to flee from the regime or to involve themselves in the humanitarian aid activities (aid which was given to people who ran away from the fight between NATO, pro- and anti-regime forces). According to these interviewees, cafés in Tunisia turned into meeting public spaces where Libyans (locals or those who had returned from exile) came together to discuss Libya's affairs. Here one interviewee said:

“Ok, in June, I decided to leave for Tunisia because my friends who were already there told me that the number of refugees had increased and they needed more help. When I arrived, I was very busy and did not even use social media. I found something different which I enjoyed very much, the political life in the cafés. There were some well-known cafés that we used to meet at. We met opposition figures, who took a political role after the fall of the regime. They were discussing many issues and giving a vision of the future. For example, we discussed the types of governance and the process of the political transition period and many other issues. These discussions advanced my understanding of politics very much. I had no idea before about these issues. The situation was very promising” (T-M-15-PRO)

The above examples show that there were seemingly vibrant public spaces such as parks and cafes where many protests were held and people met. This situation resembled to some degree Habermas' classical coffee houses where people come together to discuss public

issues and concerns, thereby forming and shaping new views and opinions. The different form of activism and the willingness to talk about politics suggests that a new form of civic/political culture might have been evolving at that time in Libyan society, especially among youth.

- **Radio**

Towards the end of the uprising (approximately between June and August), the participants, particularly those in the regime-controlled areas, reported that there was a real scarcity of information. The phone services (landlines and cell phones) and the electricity were further interrupted. This meant there was no TV channel to watch and no phone calls could be made. At this time, two participants reported that they had to use a battery-operated radio in order to find out the latest updates and news about the events. One interviewee described these moments:

“From around June to August, we kind of returned back to the stone age. We were completely isolated. There were no mobile services and no electricity in Sabha. So there was no way to find out what was going on up there in Tripoli or Benghazi. However, I found a way to get the news. I used a battery-operated radio. You know, I heard about the liberation of Tripoli on 20th August through the radio. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have known straight away” (S-F-17-PRO)

This quote reflects on how hard and difficult the situation was at that time. It shows the extent to which people were isolated and in need of information. However, people made use of the available methods to break this isolation and stay connected.

To summarise, this section has presented how the government made strong efforts to disconnect people from one another and isolate them by shutting down different sources of information. However, despite the mass surveillance and censorship, counter-publics (Fraser, 1990) emerged to oppose and challenge the government’s control over the flow of information. Multiple types of communications both old and new were used, integrated and intertwined to stay connected and circumvent the government censorship. It seems that the mass surveillance indeed caused concern, but in a state of mass protests that were already gaining momentum, it seemed less effective.

5.4 Chapter overview

This chapter has covered two phases, before and during the uprising. The findings on the pre-uprising period revealed that the political environment was tightly controlled and repressed. Young people feared voicing their opinion freely and openly due to government repression. Although there were a few attempts to challenge the government control over the public sphere, they were limited and in some cases monitored. Therefore, self-censorship remained widely practised.

During the revolutionary times, the government further intensified its surveillance over citizens. This included threats, arrest, internet censorship, and interruption of satellite TV channels and telecommunication services. While some participants feared taking any action and remained spectators, others were enthusiastic and emotionally driven. They were able to overcome these barriers. They managed to circumvent the government censorship and appropriate different technologies for their purposes. A number of participants adopted innovative communications solutions to stay connected and spread their message. Traditional media gave the rebels' actions more visibility and presence.

The pro-regime participants appeared to be less active. They remained mainly recipients of news and information through traditional media, mainly TV channels. However, the regime itself made efforts through its electronic army to stop the revolutionary networks from expanding, but that seemed to be difficult after protests that were already gaining momentum.

Chapter 6: Social media use after the uprising

This chapter presents young people's social media use and the observed changes in their online practices and experiences in relation to the unfolding political events after the uprising (late 2011-2016). The aim is to explore the nature of the emerging networked public sphere at this period of time and to discuss to what extent social media has helped to foster a more democratic environment. The analysis revealed interesting post-revolutionary dynamics organised topically and chronologically into two broad themes. First, *social media, a newfound freedom of expression and a vibrant political environment*. This theme described how the social media landscape opened up suddenly in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime (late 2011-2014), revealing a vibrant political environment marked by different forms of political activities and practices. Second, *social media, misinformation and political polarisation*. This theme described how the vibrant

political environment has devolved into an environment of conflict, chaos and confusion. It also described a set of practices and dynamics that emerged in response to the country's unsettling dynamics between 2014-2016. Findings are presented in the following sections.

6.1 Social media, a newfound freedom of expression and a vibrant political environment

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime, the social media scene opened up suddenly in Libya. A newfound freedom of expression altered the landscape of social media and fostered positive trends of political participation. Based on the interviews, a set of social media uses, activities and practices relating to the evolving political situation has been identified. These uses, activities and experiences are organised in the following themes: (1) Social media as a means of self-expression; (2) social media as a means to access and gather information; (3) convergence of new and old media; (4) social media as a tool for documenting and sharing events; (5) bridging online and offline worlds; (6) social media for organising and coordinating events. These themes are discussed below.

6.1.1 Social media as a means of self-expression

After the removal of the regime, a newfound freedom of expression altered the social media landscape. For the first time, many participants, mainly pro-revolution (n=15), reported that they could speak their opinion freely without fear of repression compared to the regime era. This stage was perceived as having high levels of freedom of expression. As one participant commented:

“Well, it was an unprecedented freedom. The regime we feared was removed. So what we could not say during the revolution or even before, we were able to express it at this point of time. I myself participated in different online activities such as blogging and posting to express my thoughts and also my feelings” (T-F-01-PRO)

The end of eight months of intense conflict gave rise to euphoric feelings in many pro-revolution participants. This immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime was characterised not only by vibrant self-expression but also by a vibrant emotionality. For example:

“I can say that this year was the happiest year in my life. We were talking about everything without fear. I discussed many topics and issues related to the election, collecting weapons from people and the constitution. I had discussions with many

Libyans from east, west and the south. We were looking forward to building the new Libya” (B-M-07-PRO)

Another said:

“You know it was a happy ending that not many of us expected. So Facebook was the platform where people expressed their happiness and victorious feelings. We shared messages of solidarity and we also shared pictures and videos of the revolutionary celebrations from almost every city across the country. 2012 was a very lively and unforgettable year!” (T-M-15-PRO)

These extracts above show how people connected over affective expressions of solidarity and personal stories that might have constituted what Papacharissi (2015) called ‘affective publics’. Through social media, mainly Facebook, ‘affective publics’ were created around shared stories and personal expressions that combined facts with opinion and emotions. In this case, considering social media as a site of fact-based and rational discussion is less relevant because the emotional expressions are constituting an important aspect of political discussion on social media.

Whilst nearly all pro-revolution participants reported that they had expressed themselves freely in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, one participant reported a different experience:

“I was interviewed by France 24 [TV channel]. I talked about cases of torture and secret prisons established by rebels in 2012. The video of my interview went viral on social media and was shared heavily by many Facebook pages. This caused me a lot of problems. I was heavily criticised because the image of the rebels in some people’s mind was perfect. For them, the rebels wouldn’t make mistakes or wrongdoings. I received many Facebook messages from people who I knew or didn’t know. It ranged from abusive and threatening messages to messages that doubted the credibility of what I had said in the interview. So, I was scared and put under deep pressure that led me to stop my online activities for a while. I only was observing reactions and comments from people without commenting or interacting with them. I returned after a while when people forgot about it” (T-F-05-PRO)

This quote revealed that social media was not truly open and free when it came to discussing controversial or sensitive issues. Critical topics, which were not in harmony with the online

or offline mainstream version of events, seemed to generate conflictual reactions. In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, the interviews demonstrated that the image of the rebels tended to be idealised by those who supported the revolution. The rebels were seen as saviours and freedom fighters who brought victory and toppled the regime. Therefore, challenging this image seemed to be taboo and a difficult task. This point can be also linked to the concept of ‘affective publics’ and how the revolutionaries might have been connected emotionally to the rebels in a way that seemed to give them identity. Thus, it can be said that identity and emotion became important elements that defined publics at this point in time.

The study also found more evidence that social media was restricted and limited. Fears of reprisals prevented many pro-regime participants from expressing themselves. Therefore, they avoided sharing their opinions or stances, although some posted responses. For example:

“I was so angry and anxious after the events but I couldn’t speak up or express my feelings. I even preferred to spend most of my time at home. I didn’t want to see people. I felt I didn’t belong with them or their celebrations” (B-F-11-ANTI)

However, while many pro-regime participants (n=5) refrained from voicing their opinion online, one did but under pseudonyms. The anonymity afforded by social media seem to give some people freedom to post their personal views. For example:

“I live in Tripoli but I belong to Gaddadfa tribe (Arabic: الغدافة). I was using a fake name on Facebook so that no one could identify me. I expressed my view and my anger against this Nakbah (Arabic: النكبة, literally "catastrophe"). (T-F-24-ANTI)

The phrase ‘al-Nakbah’ is used in the Libyan context by the regime’s supporters to convey outrage at the ‘17 February revolution’. This phrase originally refers to a Palestinian exodus that occurred when Palestinian Arabs were expelled from their homes during the 1948 Palestine-Israeli war.

This participant stated that she had had a conflict with other users with different stances in which both sides verbally attacked and insulted each other. Describing this chaotic situation, another participant explained:

“It was KG1 democracy. People suddenly experienced a big shift where they found themselves able to say or do whatever they wanted” (T-M-15-PRO)

KG1, a kindergarten, is a metaphor used by this participant to indicate the lack of experience in practising democracy. However, this tendency of insulting and disagreeing with each other is not something related only to new democracies; the internet in general has a tendency to create a polarised and conflictual environment even in established democracies such as the U.S. (Fuchs, 2010; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

6.1.2 Social media as a means to access and gather information

Almost all participants (23 out of 25) reported that they relied on social media on a daily basis to find out the latest news and updates on the then-current situation in the country. They perceived social media platforms, particularly Facebook, as a new central hub of different types of information and news in addition to other traditional communication channels such as TV. For example, one interviewee acknowledged its importance in providing easy access to up-to-date information by commenting:

“For me, social media became my main source of information after the revolution. Otherwise, how would I know what’s going on? Any social or political events or incidents happening in the country are reported there. Basically anything can be found there!” (B-M-07-PRO)

Another participant reported that social media provided him with sufficient information on the voting process for the Libyan parliamentary election that was held in July 2012. Since this vote was the first in more than 40 years, this participant thought that reading posts on social media platforms was the quickest way to learn about and understand the voting process and its outcome. Based on his experience, he stated the following:

“After the revolution, there was no better source than social media to keep up with up-to-the-minute information. There were many pages launched to report news or to support the political campaigns for parties or individual candidates. I used to follow them before the election. You know it was our first experience in voting and we were not really aware of how things would proceed. The content posted on social media to describe the election such as illustrative videos or online flyers helped me a lot in understanding many political matters. In addition, there was information about the candidates and parties and also women’s right to vote. Some parties

launched online campaigns to gain support. All of these matters were posted and discussed. Basically, they gave us detailed information from who can vote, how to register, the ways of voting to how the votes were counted and proceeded. All of this information was easy to access on social media” (B-M-08-PRO)

This quote reflected a lively and vibrant level of political activity, marked by young people participating in different forms of online political activities. It shows how they moved from practising entertainment prior to the uprising to mainly practising and discussing politics in the immediate aftermath. This quote also draws our attention to how social media platforms were used as a means of publicity to support some political candidates and parties. Although it was the first election in more than 40 years in Libya, some political actors employed the new forms of digital political election campaigns along with traditional forms to gain wider public support and solidarity.

In this immediate aftermath of the uprising, social media was an important channel for different groups, e.g. pro-and anti-regime. For example, whilst the majority of pro-uprising participants were concerned with revolutionary information such as the election and voting, pro-regime participants were seeking updates and news associated with the Green resistance¹⁴. An example of this is below:

“The main news I was interested in during that time was about the Green resistance. On some Facebook pages that were affiliated with the Green movements, there was information related to resistance. At that time, there was a focused view that the regime would take over again, claiming that Al-Gaddafi was still alive. So, I mostly followed this kind of social media news” (S-M-21-UNC)

It was clear from the interviews with both pro- and anti-regime participants that information and news was mainly sought through like-minded Facebook pages. Participants were mainly looking for information that matched their pre-existing views. This tendency of seeking like-minded content suggests that participants were likely to fall into the trap of confirmation bias. Therefore, their risk of isolation seemed to be much higher than if they were exposed to contrary points of view. In other words, participants were likely to be sitting in filter bubbles that might have potentially reinforced their own biases.

¹⁴ The Green Resistance (after the colour of Libya’s flag before the uprising) is a term sometimes used to refer to supposed pro-Gaddafi militant groups.

However, while some participants might have fallen into the confirmation bias trap, a number of participants appeared to be more open and able to break out of echo chambers. They reported that they even sought content that went against their political views. As one participant commented:

“I had no problem in following Facebook pages with a different political stance. I wanted to know what and how each group thought, what their views were and how they perceived things. It was important to try to understand the whole picture. Someone needs to think before just supporting one side over another” (T-F-06-UNC)

The quote shows that this participant seemed to leave her comfort zone, and moved to look for different news. The participant did not seem to be overtly affective. Rather, she used critical reasoning and thinking to make her own conclusion about what was going on. This way of thinking is considered important for creating a well-functioning public sphere in the Habermasian sense. However, it is worth mentioning that this participant, who claimed to be tolerant and open to different views, had a moderate political stance in relation to the revolution. This could possibly explain her willingness to interact with a variety of views and ideas.

Yet, while several participants were keen to look for information and news, a few argued that staying informed and connected did not require much effort. For example, one interviewee said:

“I don’t really look for information but the information comes to me. Important things usually go viral and everybody starts sharing them. So, you will eventually know about anything new while you are chatting with someone or doing any other activities. It will just appear on your social media feed” (T-F-02-PRO)

This excerpt shed light on the fluid nature of the new information environment created by social media. Although social media might confirm pre-existing biases, it simultaneously can expose people to a variety of views by allowing them to simply encounter them while carrying on a routine activity.

6.1.3 Convergence of new and old media

The new information environment created by social media was one of rich content and material. Many participants (21 out of 25) reported that they had seen news from traditional

media re-presented on social media platforms and vice versa. The traditional news they had seen on social media was mainly broadcast by Libyan satellite channels that emerged after the revolution (Quintanilla & Dajani, 2012). The following quote shows how both traditional and social media were integrated in order to transmit news and cover domestic events:

“Look, anything important on TV such as a government press conference or a public speech was immediately reported on social media. So, in case I missed something broadcast on TV like the prime minister’s speech, I usually found it on social media soon after. It could be downloaded as a video or the main points of the speech could be summarised in text. On the flip side, TV channels are increasingly citing social media as a source of information. I saw many users’ stories directly quoted from Facebook and presented on traditional media as first-hand experience or as an example of public opinion” (T-F-06-UNC)

This example suggest that user-generated content might have created headlines in traditional newsrooms. Therefore, ordinary people, who used to be recipients of information, could produce their own news through posting content on Facebook or Twitter such as first-hand experiences or personal opinions. In this manner, internet and social media can be said to have enhanced democracy.

6.1.4 Social media as a tool for documenting and sharing events

As discussed in the literature, cell phone penetration was high in Libya. In 2011, the penetration rate was 161 percent, with more than 10 million mobile subscriptions (Freedom House, 2015). This prevalence of mobile phone usage suggests that people can easily use their camera phones to document and share videos and images. The interview data of this study shows that many participants (N=12), particularly those with a revolutionary stance, were involved in documenting different post-revolutionary events such as celebrations, civil society¹⁵ activities, and demonstrations. For example, one participant, with 9 years of experience in blogging, made the following comment about her involvement in civil society activities and how she blogged about them with enthusiasm:

“As you know, before the revolution, it was almost impossible to create civil society organisations outside of state control. After the revolution, the door was opened

¹⁵ Civil society in Libya (e.g. NGOs) proliferated from the ground up after the revolution.

and many civil society organisations were established in 2012. I joined many of their activities and workshops. The topics ranged from prison detainees, human rights, charity, civic engagement, and democracy to rule of law. Every event I attended or workshop I was involved in, I tended to document it by taking photos and recording videos and then write blog posts about it. When I didn't find time to write, I simply posted about them on my Twitter or Facebook account. I had beliefs that the civil society could play a significant role along with the government towards democracy. As a young person, I wanted to practice democracy in the right way and build Libya” (T-F-05-PRO)

While this participant documented important moments of her own experiences, another participant explained that he documented events in his attempts to keep a record of what events occurred and when. By doing this, he believed that he could prevent historical information from being distorted. In his opinion, this allowed people, when looking back, to gain understanding of the situation regarding different events. The comment below illustrates in detail this participant's point of view:

“Documenting events is beneficial in many ways. First, it allows people to get the latest updates and news so that they can create a well-informed opinion on what is going on. Second, it contributes to keeping memories and records of important events. I myself documented and shared many events such as press conferences that were held by the successive governments on Twitter. To keep them organised, I shared them under clear hashtags. So they are easily researchable. My point is if someone in future wanted to look back in time, they can easily find the information they want. Such information can be used as evidence against or in favour of politicians or public figures. Those people sometimes denied that they said a particular thing or held a particular position. So when you keep a record of what they said, they cannot deny what their position was at a certain point in time” (B-M-07-PRO)

This act of keeping a record of historical moments is very important, and it resonates with Bennett & Segerberg's argument that social media platforms can function as archives of memory records or action repertoires that might be transferred to other users (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). What is also interesting about this quote is how social media affordances were utilised to curate and organise content under hashtags to facilitate the search process

and tracking discussion topics. This way of blogging and documenting could be considered a kind of “citizen journalism” practice that combines photo blogging and video blogging with text to build an archive of Libya’s battle for democracy. As such, massive amounts of information can be kept and stored for later access that may feed the public debate, and thus, enrich the public sphere.

6.1.5 Bridging online and offline worlds

Through everyday conversations with friends and family in workplace or social and public events, many participants (N=21) contributed to transmitting online information and news outside the boundaries of the digital space. It became apparent that social media was providing a new political communicative space, rich with information and news that did not occur elsewhere. Based on her experience engaging in a range of forms of political offline conversation, a young participant from Sabha explained:

“I was so active on Twitter in the subsequent two years of the revolution. I educated myself first about the political transition in Libya. Things like types of governments, the parliamentary election, its tasks, the process of writing a constitution and so on. All the relevant information was there on social media. Then, when I met my friends and family, particularly those who were not on social media, I explained everything I knew to them. I did this many times at work or at even social gatherings. I liked to engage in such political conversations. I was full of hope in that time and enthusiastic about helping people understand what was going on” (S-F-17-PRO)

It is interesting to think about how social media content makes its way into these information grounds, through this participant sharing her experience and what she learned online with people in her social circle. Creating this interconnection between the two worlds might have helped to reduce existing digital inequality, and facilitated the flow of information, particularly to those who lacked digital skills and internet access.

Similar to the mechanism described above, this quote below also demonstrates how information and news were transmitted between the online and offline worlds:

“Well, my parents tended to watch TV because they did not have the required skills to use the internet. So for example when there was any conflict, fight or incident, I gave them more up-to-date information than TV, with all the videos and images that

people were sharing. Social media is faster and quicker to find out and get more detailed information than TV” (T-M-15-PRO)

This quote highlights two important issues. First, it demonstrates how mainstream media was not the first platform for information on everyday news, particularly for young people. Second, this statement shows that this participant’s family was unable to use the internet because they lacked the required skills. This means that digital divide was not simply a matter of ease of internet access but also technical skills. Without the required skills, people cannot use the internet. However, this digital gap seems to be slightly narrowed in the recent years after the uprising. This participant interestingly added:

“Well, today, my mom has her own Facebook account. I opened one for her and she learned how to use it” (B-M-15-PRO)

This statement resonates with the internet statistics that show a continuing increase in the number of internet and social media users in Libya.

6.1.6 Social media for organising and coordinating events

In Libya’s post uprising, the majority of participants did not use social media themselves for mobilising or coordinating events. Only two participants reported that they engaged in events where social media platforms were used for organisation and coordination purposes. For example, one Tripoli-based participant had an experience using social media to coordinate and publicise some post-revolutionary events:

“The first activity I joined after the revolution was an event organised in Tripoli in 2012. It was a big event organised to show that the city was safe and able to host ambassadors and delegations from around the world. This event was organised at a national level. Many politicians and different actors attended. I was one of the organising committee members. Besides traditional ways of communication, we used social media for organising and coordinating things but most importantly for publicising the event. It was through a Facebook page we created to make people aware of the event and encourage them to turn up” (T-M-18-PRO)

Some Benghazi-based participants also recalled how Facebook and Twitter were used to organise and support anti-militia demonstrations after the death of U.S. Ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens.

“Yes, I remember there was a demonstration in September 21, 2012, which followed the killing of the U.S. ambassador in Benghazi by members of the Ansar al-Sharia militia. It was called ‘the Friday to rescue Benghazi’. There was a circulated online invitation saying that everyone should change the image of their Facebook profile to a certain logo. On this logo, it says ‘I am really going to participate’. I changed my profile picture and also I joined the demonstration against the militia on the ground” (B-M-07-PRO)

This example shows how social media is not only capable of organising events but also can mobilise people to offline forms of collective politics.

Unlike using social media for organising large-scale events, another participant used it for coordinating a small demonstration. For example, this participant said:

“I organised one demonstration when Jadhraan closed the two major oil export terminals in the East of Libya. I felt I had to do something because this would affect all Libyans. So I contacted people through creating a Facebook group chat to plan time and place. We went after that to protest but we were a small group. Only seven people” (T-M-15-PRO)

Rather than serving as a tool for mobilising large-scale collective action, social media, in this example, functioned more as a means of communication between friends with similar interests. However, what is important is that many groups with different scales adopted digital approaches of information circulation, recruitment and mobilisation through digital media tools.

6.1.7 Summary

The findings above demonstrate that social media facilitated the emergence of different networked forms of political participation. Participants’ practices and activities created a space in the public sphere where they discussed different topics that were previously off limits. However, despite this seemingly vibrant political environment, social media was still limited and not truly open for all topics to be discussed. While formerly taboo subjects such as political topics became open to discussion, new taboos emerged such as criticising the rebels or the 17 February Revolution. Discussing topics that did not fit in the revolutionary mainstream seemed to be difficult to some degree. This suggests that although

there was a promise of unrestrained participation, there were still areas that were difficult to discuss.

6.2 Social media, misinformation and political polarisation

While the social media landscape opened up suddenly in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime, the subsequent political struggle for power in the country and accompanying lawlessness brought about new trends, challenges and dynamics different from the immediate aftermath. These new trends and practices are organised in the following themes:

6.2.1 Social media's perceived credibility and reliability

The credibility of online information emerged as an important factor influencing participants' use of social media platforms in the later stage of Libya's post-uprising period (2014-2016). At this later stage, all interviewees expressed less trust in social media compared to the earlier post-revolutionary stage. This is not to say that participants stopped relying on social media as a source of information, but their perceptions towards its credibility had changed. For example, one participant expressed the following while reflecting on her experience back in 2011 when she felt highly sympathetic to the revolution:

“Well, I feel I was used. I thought everything posted on social media was correct but I found out that not all things I believed to be facts about the events were correct. I don't remember specific examples now but I feel many things were made up and exaggerated. The events of the uprising were very fast and intense and there was a lot of confusion and pressure. We couldn't get a chance to evaluate things. However, we have now learnt, but it is too late” (B-F-13-PRO)

This participant thought that she lacked sufficient experience in assessing and judging the accuracy of online information during the revolution. She believed that her sympathy towards the revolution prevented her from making a reasonable judgment of the information she consumed. This indicates that social media might have lacked credibility and could even have been manipulated to spread false news and misinformation to achieve a particular agenda.

Several participants reflected the sense of being exploited and manipulated by media during the uprising, specifically those with pro-revolutionary stances. They mainly linked this with

the abundance of rumours and amplified information they consumed during the revolutionary times as well as the intensity of the events. For example:

“During the uprising, horrific information was circulated around the rape allegations by the regime forces, and also about hiring mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa to fight for the regime. We heard about this on social media and on TV channels alike. This news for example made my father’s political position shift from being neutral towards the uprising to supporting it and standing with the rebels. Unfortunately, there was no such thing. There might be a few cases but not as the media put it.” (B-F-10-PRO)

Regardless of how accurate the information about the rape allegations or the mercenaries was, the example above shows how such shocking information can have a powerful impact on people’s minds and attention, particularly in a highly conservative society such as Libya. Focusing people’s attention on such a sensitive issue may have been one among many methods used to fuel the protests and mobilise people against the regime.

Contrary to the pro-revolution participants, pro-regime participants did not doubt information that was circulated by the regime media in relation to the rebels’ misconduct during the uprising, even when they looked back at the past. This means that participants’ perceptions, beliefs and feelings seemed to affect how they viewed the credibility of information. Put differently, participants seem more likely to be inclined to information that confirmed pre-existing biases.

However, despite this, participants in general showed progress towards understanding the nature of social media as a two-way channel of accurate as well as false information. This understanding impacted their practices and behaviour on social media regardless of their ideologies. In fact, they developed strategies and approaches to verify and deal with online information both as consumers and distributors. These approaches are discussed below.

6.2.1.1 Verifying information with friends and family

In order to validate social media information and news, one tactic commonly used by many participants (n=21) was to verify information and news with friends and family. As one interviewee reported:

“Facts can be easily fabricated and distorted. Libya today is a fertile ground for fake news and misinformation. So what I often do is to check with my friends and

family. For example, a few days ago, there was news on Facebook about a fight between two militias in Tripoli but when I inboxed my friend who lives nearby he told me that the loud sound was a bonfire because of a wedding celebration” (T-M-15-PRO)

This quote indicates a major shift in the way people deal with online information over time. People seem to place more trust in information received from friends and family rather than acquaintances, distant friends or strangers on social media. Here we can observe that information received through ‘strong ties’ (close social relations or strong bonds) was likely to be perceived as more trustworthy than if received via ‘weak ties’ (weak bonds and social relations). This tendency shows how public attitudes started to shift towards embracing a cautious approach when consuming social media information.

6.2.1.2 Verifying information using digital tools

Another reported way to check information and news was through using digital tools. A few participants (n=9) stated that they often used reverse image search tools such as Google Images and TinEye to verify pictures they were not sure about. The quote below points out the importance of these tools in debunking faked images:

“After the airstrike on Derna last year, there was an image of wounded kids that went viral on social media. I directly used Google Images to verify this image because I doubted it. I was right and the image was not of Libyan kids but related to kids from Gaza” (B-M-07-PRO)

Although this example showed how social media seemed to become increasingly a space for fake stories and propaganda, there is the possibility of verifying, judging and evaluating the information using the affordances of digital technology. The statement below also shows how the technology features embedded in social media allowed for information validation:

“When I read breaking news on social media, particularly those that include phrases such as ‘happening now’ or ‘urgent’, I straightaway use the Facebook search box to check if this is really happening now or a while ago. For example, a few days ago, I came across a post about some militias’ fight in Tripoli containing the phrase ‘happening now’. I searched using the filter feature of Facebook to sort the search results by date and time. What was interesting was that the fight was

already over but some people were still sharing the same post with the phrase ‘happening now’” (T-M-15-PRO)

This quote, on one hand, shows how misinformation spread easily on social media if people shared and posted information without checking. Although it might not be a deliberate attempt to spread misinformation, it makes the online environment more chaotic and problematic because it maintains false reports to spread. On the other hand, this quote shows improvement in people’s practices over time in terms of how they observe and consume social media information. Rather than taking information they read as fact, they start questioning and evaluating its credibility. As one interviewee commented:

“Recently, I think people’s ability to assess any piece of information has improved. People who get easily fooled by particular information are fewer than before. People have a suspicion about everything now. They start to doubt and think carefully about whatever they read. Is it realistic or not? Why is this story posted at this time? Simply, they start questioning. They moved from only reading information to a more advanced level in which they analyse and compare the news. They start linking things together in order to understand what is going on. I myself read the news from different online platforms and sources before drawing my own conclusion” (T-M-18-PRO)

This behaviour indicates the change in the way how people tackle information. Doubting and questioning reflect a critical attitude which means that people become more evaluative about information they read. Critical and rational thinking is an important element in the development of the public sphere.

6.2.1.3 Switching between social media platforms

Most participants reflected awareness of the potential bias of social media information. Therefore, they thought that checking the same fact in different platforms and sources could be helpful before drawing any conclusion. Twitter was the most reported platform that participants switched to (n=17). Twitter was perceived as a more reliable source of information than Facebook. It was also viewed as a more professional platform that is less chaotic and hostile. In the following example, one participant explained the reasons behind his preference of Twitter over Facebook.

“Twitter is more professional than Facebook. It has only 140 characters which fits news. You can get the main point without the need to read long texts. If someone wants more details, he can simply click on the links or hashtags about any incident and find all the information in one place. For me, Twitter is a convenient platform and does not give me headaches” (T-M-04-PRO)

However, this view was contested by a number of participants who thought that Twitter had started to become a noisy platform along the lines of Facebook. In their perspective, the increase in the number of Twitter users in Libya seemed to attract supporters and dissenters of different causes and ideologies to the platform, turning it into a conflictual space. Although this condition cannot create an ideal public sphere, it can certainly allow adversaries to come together in one space. In this manner, it can be said that social media creates publics and connects them together despite their differences.

6.2.1.4 Developing the trust relationship

Due to there often being a lot of confusion and doubt around which claims were true, participants (n=16) started to take their information from certain sources with which they had developed a trust relationship. This trust relationship, as they reported, developed over time with certain Facebook pages or Twitter accounts. For example, one interviewee commented:

“Over time, you can identify which Facebook page or Twitter account you can trust and which one is delivering more trustworthy information than another. Some pages are very reliable. They even edit their posts and apologise if they post something wrong. Anyway there is no ultimate trust” (T-M-03-ANTI)

The phrase ‘there is no ultimate trust’ shows that the credibility of social media information is relative. Although this participant built a relationship of trust with certain social media networks, he was aware that social media might present inaccurate content. This therefore reflects that there seemed to be a deepening awareness over time among the study participants.

Participants also reported that they started placing more trust in verified accounts and personal profiles rather than public or anonymous sources. The reason behind that was mainly because:

“...the thing is you don’t know who is sitting behind the keyboard managing this or that page. Is he or she a child, a politician, crazy person? While when you follow a personal profile or a well-known person such as a journalist, activist or a thinker, you know at least who they are and what their ideological bias might be. They are not anonymous to you. So, they also are much more accountable about what they publish compared to those hiding behind fake names” (S-F-9-PRO)

Another participant discussed the need to strengthen the government and official bodies’ capacity for the use of the social media. This participant believed that people in authority should increase their adoption of social media as one way to interact with citizens and listen to their views in a transparent manner. Elaborating further on his point, he said:

“Currently the government’s use of social media is not professional and also unofficial. For example, the Government of National Accord (Arabic: حكومة الوفاق الوطني) does not have a verified social media account. So, those accounts available on social media that act on its behalf are not trustworthy” (B-M-07-PRO)

Here we have another observation that information received through ‘strong ties’ (professional journalists, thinkers, activists, verified accounts) was likely to be perceived as more trustworthy than if received via ‘weak ties’ (anonymous Facebook pages). The anonymity afforded by social media, therefore, could limit its ability to mobilise people or influence their opinion because they may increasingly become distrustful of anonymous communications.

6.2.1.5 Reading through users’ interactions

Checking other users’ comments was another reported strategy to assess whether online content include truthful information or not. For example:

“I often read through users’ comments after I read any post because people often confirm or disconfirm what has been posted. They also sometimes add to or correct it. For example, they might provide a link to the same information or refer to another page. So, you can check and compare” (B-F-11-ANTI)

This strategy is important because it may help to prevent fake news from spreading online, as users may be less likely to re-post information if they are aware of its nature.

6.2.1.6 Ignoring and delaying interacting with social media information

Although there is the potential to verify social media information, there is also a lot of difficulty in telling what is true and what is false. In a situation where participants' attempts turned out to be futile, the common attitude was to ignore or delay interacting with such information. As one interviewee put it:

"If I am distrustful of what I read, I simply put it on the shelf" (S-F-09-PRO)

This participant further added that:

"Stories could verify themselves. You just need to wait for some time, and then more information will appear to either contradict or support what has been posted. At the end, it depends on your ability to discern what was going on. However, most of the time you remain confused. So there is no way to understand sometimes" (S-F-09-PRO)

Although participants seemed to retain a healthy scepticism in the way they looked at information, there comes a point where everyone is distrustful of everything. This also becomes a problem and hence it is difficult for a democratic public sphere to function.

6.2.2 The credibility of old vs. new media

Although participants placed less trust in social media, it commanded more trust than TV. The study revealed that there was a dramatic decline in trusting old media, particularly satellite TV channels both nationally and regionally. Most participants held negative views toward the Libyan TV channels, specifically those not run by the state, including but not limited to Al-Nabba TV, Libya's Channel, Libya One and Libya al Hadath TV. As one participant stated:

"All TV channels are politicised. They originated the news depending on the agendas of their owners. That is why I distrust them. Although this is also possible on social media, at least there is still the possibility to find information posted by ordinary people but not from editors who want to feed you something for their own purposes" (T-F-05-PRO)

However, losing trust in old media was not only limited to the national level but also regional. The Al-Jazeera channel in particular seemed to totally lose its credibility among the study participants. Many participants either pro- or against the uprising stated that they

did not rely any longer on Al-Jazeera as a reliable source of news. The quote below demonstrates the dramatic declining trust in Al-Jazeera as well as some other national channels:

“I cancelled Al-Jazeera and some other Libyan channels from the list of channels on my own TV. I feel sick when I watch them because of bias and propaganda. So I simply got rid of them. I even don't join my family in the living room if they are watching these channels. I feel much more comfortable like this. Less headache”
(T-M-04-PRO)

It is apparent that the Al-Jazeera channel seems to face a failure in maintaining a relationship with its audience. Its position in commanding participants' attention compared to the past appeared to be lost because they believed that its news was ideologically-loaded. In fact, a recent study by Ethelb (2016) confirmed this point. Ethelb found that Al-Jazeera news headlines that were produced by Reuters in English and then adapted by Aljazeera have been ideologically mediated in a way that involved reformulating an Arabic version different from the original to conform to Al-Jazeera's political and ideological agenda. These tactics and strategies to control and shape the public sphere are indeed a problem for the functioning of a democratic public sphere because such an information environment lacks transparency.

6.2.3 Social media for informing citizens and saving lives

Since 2014, Libya has been plagued by occasional fighting between militias in various areas, streets and alleys, erupting at different times and places. Within this chaotic situation, social media were used in a unique way in sending crucial and helpful information about the current situation. Participants (n=18) reported that many groups on Facebook have been created to exchange useful information to let people know where they can find petrol stations with fuel supply or banks with cash supply, and avoid areas of conflict. The quote below gives further explanation:

“In Tripoli, there is a public Facebook group that has been established in order to let people know occurrences of danger and violence. It is called ‘Safe Path Tripoli’. The idea behind launching this group emerged when my friend was on his way back to Tripoli from Tunisia. He was stuck in Zawiya for three days because of the fight between militias that occurred in Tripoli in 2014. He was not able to find safe routes to reach his home in Tripoli. So, after the battle was over, he decided to set up a

Facebook group to help people if a similar situation happened, to stay safe and informed. The mechanism of sharing information in this group is that each member can provide information on the areas that are near or close to them. They might say something like, “red light,” to signal an area where militias are fighting or where fake checkpoints are taking people for ransom. They also can guide you on which safe paths can be used, which roads are open and which ones are blocked. I personally used this group to seek or share information with others. The information flows directly from people to people. The admin also tried to minimise misinformation by asking the users not to post without making sure their information is reliable. He also asked people to post under the hashtag #SafePath so that information can be found easily. He also thinks of building a mobile phone application based on this group for more flexible and faster services” (T-M-04-PRO)

This example shows how social media become successful and vital sources of emergency and crisis information. It helps to quickly spread helpful information about the then-current situation. In the absence of the government’s role in securing areas, or even providing citizens with sufficient information to protect their safety, people in the meantime took on this responsibility and utilised social media to face everyday life challenges. This finding supports a recent study by Reilly & Tantanasi (2018) in which social media was effective in reducing the number of casualties caused by air strikes in the Syrian civil war.

While social media might help in crisis situations, it can also be used negatively. The quote below explains how social media was used to threaten people as well as for defamation:

“As I told you, I work as a Libya Telecom & Technology employee. There were several cases reported to the company about people using social media for defamation, hacking and espionage on individuals or activists for the purpose of threat, extortion and demanding ransom. However, we in the company cannot identify the exact location of these suspicious accounts. We only can give the location of the antenna that those criminals connect from, which usually covers almost five kilometres away. So, it is hard to follow them within this large space” (T-M-15-PRO)

The example above suggests that although social media has the potential to be effective too during crisis and emergency situations, it may simultaneously put individuals and activists’

safety at risk. The difficulties in preventing the act of cybercrime and cyberwar make online interactions a dangerous practice, particularly in a failed and lawless state such as Libya today. This of course can impact negatively on the development of the public sphere because it could lead people to avoid political practices to protect their safety.

6.2.4 Social media for targeting specific audiences/ campaign of persuasion

Although social media has the potential to provide people with a variety of content and information, it does not guarantee that people can form a more balanced view or informed decision just because of the availability of information. In fact, just as social media may provide people the information they need, it may also give them the information that someone else wants, in a way that may influence opinions and direct attention to certain issues, leading to people changing positions or rallying behind certain individuals or groups. The comment below reflects on this point:

“My friends and I recently tried to purchase Facebook advertisements from a local company in order to publicise a particular political event that we wanted to organise: a campaign on a national level. We wanted to bring people together for reconciliation purposes. We wanted to reach and influence a larger number of people through Facebook. Social media is very important in stirring things up and directing people’s opinion. Unfortunately, the lack of funds stopped us from continuing this project. You know: no fund, no project” (T-M-18-PRO)

This technique suggests that social media platforms might contribute to the improvement of the democratic process by tailoring more persuasive campaign messages on a range of issues such as reconciliation. However, there are concerns that such techniques might be used by political elites in order to manipulate public discourse perception, turning citizens to potential ‘consumers’ (Bates, 2016) and thus restricting the development of the democratic process.

In this regard, an increased awareness of the potential use of social media in stirring things up and manipulating people’s views was frequently stated in the interviews:

“Basically, it is an information war. Different groups are trying to feed us certain information and telling us how to think. Each group or party nowadays in Libya has their own electronic army to support them against their opponents. So, you can find the same story posted or described in many different ways. Let me give you an

example: if you read news about someone killed, he would be described as a martyr, victim or maybe an evil person who deserved it. It depends on how each group wants you to understand or look at certain news. So you need to be careful” (B-M-08-PRO)

Although it could be difficult to expand one’s worldview and consider all sides of an issue, two common approaches were reported by participants that helped them slightly to avoid their opinion being constructed and shaped by a certain or single point of view. These common approaches were:

- *Diversifying social media feeds*

A number of participants (n=12) claimed that they often sought alternatives by following new voices in order to look for opinions and views different from their own. For example, one participant stated that he tended to follow online content that he disagreed with because:

“I know that most of what I see are opinions and voices like my own. So I wanted to explore new things. Someone should get out of his comfort zone to see what others think or believe. There is so much information out there” (B-M-8-PRO)

Another reported that being tolerant to and interacting with diverse views and opinion on social media provided opportunities for open and informed democratic debate:

“I deeply supported the Movement for Federal¹⁶ Libya. However, after having a conversation on Twitter with someone who is against federalisation, he convinced me and I totally changed my opinion after that” (B-M-07-PRO)

This example shows how the importance of interacting with a wide range of debates and views is vital to the functioning of a healthy democracy.

- *Deleting and unfollowing*

Several participants reported that they deleted certain political Facebook pages, particularly sponsored ones because:

¹⁶ A movement erupted many times after the uprising in which its supporters demand the establishment of a federal governing structure in Libya based on the country’s 1951 constitution—a time when Libya was divided into three federal states Cyrenaica (East), Fezzan (South), and Tripolitania (West).

“...they were simply working towards their own personal benefits and gains. No one thinks of building the country but they further fuelled the division and separation” (T-M-04-PRO)

However, the mechanism of following or unfollowing certain Facebook pages or Twitter accounts is not straightforward. For example:

“It is hard to say. For example, I deleted some Facebook pages and then re-followed them. What you disliked today, you might re-like tomorrow. The positions of the pages also can change. The pages themselves change. They sometimes become less active, or less trustworthy and so on. We also change. Our ideologies and views, and thus the pages we follow. You never know” (T-M-15-PRO)

This quote demonstrates that publics are fluid and changing over time. Their feelings, ideologies and position are also shifting. Therefore, it could be difficult to draw a certain conclusion regarding the democratic potential of social media at this point in time.

6.2.5 Social media for everyday political conversation and freedom of speech

Several participants (n=21) stated that they feel less comfortable expressing their political views and discussing them with others online since 2014 (when the wave of assassinations and the struggle for power between militias began to take their toll). One view that emerged in all interviews was that Libyan society appeared to be deeply divided, in a way that led to labelling individuals, or entire cities and tribes according to certain ideologies and beliefs. In this later stage of the uprising’s aftermath, the division and tension is not only between anti- and pro-regime but also between supporters and dissenters of newly emerged ideologies and groups. These new groups include mainly the Dignity coalition (known as the army), led by Khalifa Haftar, a former army officer, based in the east of Libya; Shura Council of Benghazi; Islamist revolutionary forces (anti-Dignity); and Dawn coalition, pro-Islamist militias based in the West (anti-Dignity). As each group dominated certain geographical locations, participants stated that they felt less confident in expressing their opinion if they were against these militias and armed groups. Therefore, some returned to practise self-censorship. For example:

“We are back to square zero. If you are based in the east, it is difficult to criticise Haftar and if you are based in the west, it is difficult to criticise the Dawn group. Of course there are exceptions but you have to measure the risk by yourself and be

accountable for what you write because no one can help you. There is no law. I myself have preferred not to discuss politics recently” (T-M-16-PRO)

Some other participants thought that the best way to express critiques and opinions about critical issues was through the use of pseudonyms. As one participant commented:

“Look, the best way to express your personal feelings and opinion is through using a fake name. Otherwise, you might expose yourself to danger” (B-F-11-ANTI)

On one hand, the statement above shows how freedom of expression is in decline. On the other hand, it exemplifies the importance of the affordances of social media in allowing and enabling this participant to voice his opinion without necessarily worrying about his personal safety.

Another example of self-censorship was:

“Well, I post under my real identity. However, if I want to post about something sensitive, I often edit the privacy setting of my Facebook profile so I can choose who can see my post” (T-M-15-PRO)

These quotes above suggest that fears of reprisal and the growing uncertainty in the country’s situation enhanced participants’ self-censorship and led them to post anonymously.

Yet, posting anonymously did not always guarantee safety. The story below shows how users could be vulnerable and exposed to harm even though they communicated anonymously:

“I know someone who was an admin of a popular Facebook page. He used to criticise certain Tripoli-based militia heavily on his page. However, this militia was able to identify him. He then was threatened and forced to stop posting against them” (T-M-19-PRO)

This example further confirmed the point discussed previously that the militias would act if threatened.

Despite all this complexity, one interviewee was against the use of pseudonyms, particularly when expressing personal viewpoints. He argued that using pseudonyms could

make powerful actors feel stronger (e.g. militias), and therefore, this could eventually result in further restrictions on the freedom of speech. He explained this as follows:

“Using pseudonyms is a good choice but one should confront this phenomenon. Otherwise, it will be aggravated and no one will be able to enjoy freedom of speech either online or offline. Personally, I often post my political opinion under my real name and I will never use a fake one” (T-M-18-PRO)

Through this statement, the participant reflected a strong human agency and also willingness to take potentially significant risks for principles.

From another perspective, some other participants believed that although there was instability in the country, people were still able to post criticism and discuss their personal views. As one participant stated:

“I think it is fine to post whatever you want. Look at Facebook, it is simply a virtual battleground between different groups or individuals. Militias wouldn’t take action unless their presence on the ground was threatened. Otherwise they wouldn’t bother. I personally think I’m more confident online in expressing my views” (T-F-06-UNC)

However, despite all of these different views, there was an agreement between participants that the government(s) and state officials could be criticised without fear or even hiding behind fake names. All of these tendencies reflected a complex situation in this late stage of Libya’s post-uprising period. The ongoing developments on the ground and the dynamic loyalty of militias further complicated the situation. This complexity suggests that the role of social media in the development of the democratic process is still far from certain.

6.2.6 Social media and the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion

While many participants (n=19) increasingly used self-censorship approach to communicate around politics, it was observed that several participants (n=5) with a pro-regime stance began to communicate their anti-revolutionary views more confidently at this later stage:

“I felt so tense after the fall of the regime but I feared talking in public. I couldn’t even join their Facebook pages. Nowadays I have calmed down and I have had some discussion with those who support the revolution online. Of course none of

them can deny that this revolution led us to a dark tunnel. I know that expressing my opinion online or even offline will not lead us to find the light but at least someone can vent own feelings” (T-F-24-ANTI)

This quote shows that despite her disagreement with others, this participant began at least to interact and communicate with voices opposite to her. This attitude is important to the development of the public sphere. Although reaching consensus in this case is hard to achieve, bringing adversaries together in a single inclusive space may influence the other party’s beliefs and thus facilitate the constitution of the public sphere.

Besides this opportunity for the inclusion of diverse participants, a sense of tolerance was also expressed among the study participants. For example, one pro-revolution participant claimed to be more tolerant now compared to in the immediate aftermath of the uprising:

“Okay my attitude has changed fundamentally. I became more tolerant to other views, not because the revolution didn’t pay off but because respecting others is important. I insulted many people after the revolution just because they supported the regime. Unfortunately, I posted many comments just for the purpose of discomforting and annoying some people who are pro-regime. I understand now it was the wrong behaviour” (S-F-17-PRO)

Another pro-revolution participant said that he was collaborating with his pro-regime friend in order to administrate a Facebook page for bringing people together, stressing the need for what he called ‘*the national reconciliation*’. He elaborated:

“Okay, during the uprising and after, we have been labelled as ‘thuwar’ ثوار (rebels) and ‘azlam’ أعلام (regime loyalists). Let me admit that we swallowed the bait. Now we should change this. Through this page, we are trying to call for peace. We are trying to bring people together, reconcile between them and avoid promoting hate speech. This important for the national reconciliation” (T-M-15-PRO)

The example above suggests that the language of polarisation online in some cases seems to be decreasing. By trying to provide a balanced discourse on this page, there may be an opportunity for promoting dialogue and acceptance among different camps and groups. In this way, social media could play a positive role in contributing to building public consensus and facilitating a healthy democratic debate and practice.

On the other hand, there were also some participants who reflected a sense of intolerance and unwillingness to others opposite to them. For example:

“Currently, I am only following Facebook pages or accounts that I am comfortable with, specifically the ones that support the army (Dignity operation). I don’t feel that I want to hear anything or interact with anybody against the army” (B-F-10-PRO)

Another participant commented:

“I had online discussion with a Facebook friend about the situation in Libya. I was comparing between stability during the rule of Al-Gaddafi and the situation now. He did not accept that and he insulted me and also said that I was living in the past. I simply blocked him to avoid the headache. Blocking is the magic solution for these people” (T-M-03-ANTI)

This act of excluding others through blocking suggests that social media could reduce the opportunity to create inclusive space where everybody can join a discussion and access diverse information and ideas. Thus, it could restrict opportunities for the development of the democratic public sphere.

Overall, it can be said that social media can contribute to the post-revolutionary events in both positive and negative ways. While it could promote a participatory environment and enhance democratic process, it might simultaneously limit opportunities for participation and create a polarised environment.

6.2.7 Social media and opinion polarisation

There was a common view among participants that social media was a reflection of what was happening offline. An obvious case in point was the regional and tribal conflicts in the country. All participants commented on how this issue became critical in Libya today, affecting people’s use of social media and producing further division and fragmentation within the society. The quote below explains how polarisation of public opinion reached a high level in 2014 and continued to rise throughout the next years:

“I think social media is simply reflecting our life and problems that already exist in our society. Yes, it adds to it by exaggerating and amplifying things but the problems are already there. Take for example, the east-west divide. This is

something historical but it has been recently revived and become worse since 2014, particularly after the emergence of the two governments, one in the east and the other in the west. Of course, social media does not create this problem but probably makes it prominent. Simple as that” (B-M-12-PRO)

This shows how social media may feed and maintain the offline division through online conversations and debates, generating more tensions and struggles.

However, talking further about the role of social media in this tribal-regional environment, a number of interviewees reflected that the situation is better in reality than its portrayal on social media. For example, one interviewee said:

“To be fair, despite divisions and the problems, there is less tension in reality. From my experience, I feel people are fine when they meet even though they have different backgrounds and belong to different tribes and cities. In my opinion, social media does not really reflect reality in many respects. I am not saying that there are no problems but I think social media is amplifying things. The job of some Facebook pages is just to spread sedition and create instability in the country for certain agendas” (T-M-04-PRO)

A similar view shared by another participant:

“Well, I believe that some Facebook pages were set up merely for exaggerating statements and forcing certain agendas. In this way, they just promote hate speech and create further division in the country” (T-M-14-PRO)

This could suggest that social media does not only create polarisation but also seems to produce more fragmented and extremely unconnected groups compared to the offline environment. In this way, social media can thus isolate publics and prevent them from seeing beyond their own worlds.

However, although people may run the risk of isolation inherent in social media, they could still be exposed to richer and more diverse content and sources in different ways. For example, one participant acknowledged the affordance of Facebook in enabling her to encounter a variety of information and ideas:

“When my Facebook friends share someone’s status or ‘like’ a post or a page, it appears on my Facebook news feed. I followed many people this way. Their

activities often catch my interest and attract me to explore certain issues further. In my opinion, ideas or information on social media cannot be hidden or manipulated for a long time. Personally, social media helped me to open up to different ideas and thoughts I was not aware of” (T-F-06-UNC)

Accordingly, although social media might limit people’s ability to explore new perspectives, this example above shows that there is still a possibility of being exposed to different information and news, particularly that which is of interest to people’s personal social network such as family, acquaintances, friends and friends of friends. In this way, social media can introduce people to a diversity of voices and views, countering the flow of one-sided information, challenging different agendas, and giving people the opportunity to connect with a variety of ideas and access masses of information.

A similar case in point is discussed by another participant. She believed that social media enabled her to understand different issues regarding the revolutionary cause:

“Well, although some of these issues I am going to talk about were presented on Libyan official television during the uprising, I didn’t watch them. You know at that time, Al-Jazeera caught my attention. So after the revolution, these topics re-circulated on social media. For example, I watched a video explaining the link between NATO interference and Gaddafi’s calls to the African nations to use the golden dinar instead of the U.S. dollar and the euro. Also, I read some articles on the claims about a fund given by Gaddafi to Nicolas Sarkozy for his election campaign, and why Sarkozy was very keen to attack Libya. Also, why the keeper of Gaddafi’s secrets, Nuri Al-Mismari, fled specifically to France before the outbreak of Arab uprisings. A lot of issues like this made me step back and rethink the revolution and whether I missed certain information related to it or not” (S-F-17-PRO)

However, although social media seemed to introduce this participant to new information she was not aware of, it does not guarantee that people sharing this information are correct or credible. Just as social media may provide people the information they need, it may also give them the information that someone else wants, in a way that may influence opinions and direct attention to certain issues. This leads to the following theme.

6.2.8 Social media and manipulating public opinion

There was a common sense among several pro-revolution participants (n=13) that they were emotionally driven and exploited by the different types of media during the uprising. For example, one pro-revolution participant commented:

“The media in its coverage focused mainly on portraying the regime and its opponents as an evil vs. good. However, I am not saying that the regime was good or that there was no violence committed by its forces. Of course, there was. However, the thing that I believe now is that the complete truth was not given to us, and there was too much exaggeration. The regime had good and bad things but it was portrayed in a very bad way that made us blind to some issues” (B-M-08-PRO)

He further added:

“Looking back, I always ask myself this question. Was it better to have a revolution or to have an evolution?” (B-M-08-PRO)

This quote shows a reversal in this participant’s views and reflects a sense of regret over the old regime's demise.

Another participant felt naive about the posts he shared in the past during the revolution and its immediate aftermath when he checked them from ‘On This Day’, the ‘time travel’ feature:

“I deleted several posts because their content was clearly false and silly. I feel ashamed of myself when I read what I wrote or posted. I was hasty and naïve sharing everything without thinking” (T-M-16-PRO)

This quote shows how it might be difficult to distinguish between news value and misinformation during a conflict and in intense moments. It shows also how news propaganda might influence and manipulate people’s opinion, particularly those who lack media literacy skills.

This participant further added that he became distrustful in the political process and lost faith in the revolution. He reflected on his current position through describing himself as ‘penitent’, referring to a part of Gaddafi’s speech in the early days of the uprising when he warned the protestors, saying that *‘You’ll regret it later, but you will not be able to go back’*

(سوف تندمون، يوم لا ينفع الندم). However, this interviewee emphasised that his regret was not because the regime was perfect but because of “*safety and security*” provided by it.

However, not all pro-revolution participants doubted or lost faith in the revolution. In fact, a number of them still believe in it and its principles. In fact, they believed that their decisions to participate stemmed from a real desire and passion for change rather than being influenced by media. Despite the revolution’s outcomes, they thought that change was necessary and required. As one participant commented:

“Well, if we did not try, we would never know. I still believe in the revolution and I planned to participate before the protests even started, before the propaganda of Al-Jazeera and before videos and photos circulated on social media. I know the situation is hard now and this is not the thing we hoped for but you never know. This suffering could be a part of the change” (T-M-15-PRO)

Another participant also thought:

“Change is not easy. The failure of the revolution doesn’t mean that it was the wrong decision or a conspiracy. In my opinion, this is normal. The revolution was the first step only, and there are many steps that need to be done. I am currently working on a project called (8 + 8). It means eight solutions to solve eight problems. I am trying to reach agreement between different factions in Libya without firing any single bullet. Social media will be used for the publicity of this event when it is ready” (T-M-18-PRO)

This example reflects a strong human agency of how people might negotiate their role in society by opposing different forms of constraints in this complex transition period. This participant also believed in the role of social media in helping him achieve his goal. He thought that social media was an important space where he could create an arena to bring people together in an inclusive environment. Social media as such might act as an alternative public sphere in which people discuss and deliberate on different issues.

6.2.9 Social media and changing attitudes towards emotional content

As discussed in the previous chapter, the 2011 events triggered different complex emotions in a way that shaped participants’ views and led to action as well as non-action. The quote below further exhibits a clear example of how emotional content regarding the protests,

which also had a strong presence in traditional media, might have influenced this pro-revolution participant's response to the uprising:

"To be honest, my political information was poor. For me, Gaddafi was a symbol of Libya but when I saw the videos of protests and heard news about clashes and victims, I felt so sympathetic and angry. It was a complex feeling. I straightway supported the uprising although I didn't participate physically" (T-F-02-PRO)

This shows how emotional content might have helped to focus this participant's attention on one part of the world around her. Being immersed in such content seemed to make her miss out on counter-information in a way that may have led to pushing her further towards a certain direction.

This is something also clearly reflected in the following pro-regime participants' answer:

"...no one talked about the rebels' crimes. Media only focused on things against the regime. Do you remember the YouTube video that was broadcast on the state channel? The one that showed members of the army arrested by the rebels who were then killed. This is of course something that was not important for Al-Jazeera or other media outlets because their aim was clear. It was simply media 'presstitution'" (T-F-24-ANTI)

These examples above demonstrate that everyone had different emotions, and thus, different behaviours and different understanding of the revolution.

However, although sensational information may have shaped people's actions and opinions during the uprising, it would seem to work in a different way in the recent times of Libya's post-uprising. Participants seemed to become less overtly affective. For example, one participant explained that he became 'desensitised' to the violent scenes shared on social media. He thought that:

"We are getting used to bloody scenes. Images and videos of death and violence have become a part of our everyday life. Of course we feel sorry and sad but our reaction is not as before. It is sometimes difficult to know if it is real or not. So you don't even know what you should do. Should I feel sad or not? What if the thing I felt sad about is not true? You know, it is a very complex situation" (T-M-16-PRO)

While some felt desensitised, others commented on how social media content still triggers online reactions, but these reactions often last for a shorter time or are less likely to be translated into an offline action:

“Well, videos that contain abuse and violence often go viral and trigger a lot of discussions, shares, and comments. However, this tends to last for two or three days at most and then people forget about it and probably move on to discuss another issue. You know this makes me feel frustrated and apathetic because there is no value or real action coming out of these online discussions” (T-M-04-PRO)

This suggests that although social media may feed the momentum of certain events, it may not sustain its impetus once the event is over. This condition resonates with the concept of “slacktivism” (Morozov, 2011), where people limit their actions to no more than taking a minimal effort of joining online discussion or expressing emotions about particular posts. In this manner, the internet could lead into non-action and prevent people from productive activism.

6.2.10 Returning back to everyday social media activities

Responding to the chaos and complexity surrounding the Libyan context, it was observed that many interviewees (n=22) returned back to use social media for non-political activities, similar to what was reported before the uprising. These practices included socialising, learning, entertainment and simply hanging out. This is not to say they withdrew completely from politics but they reflected less interest in political participation. In the following sections, two points are presented. First, reasons that may induce participants’ partial political withdrawal. Second, types of non-political social media activities that participants returned to after 2014.

6.2.10.1 Reasons behind withdrawal from online political practice

In general, the negativity surrounding the Libyan atmosphere and the chaotic situation seemed to feed into growing disinterest in politics, discouraging participants to some extent from engaging politically online. Looking more specifically, certain reasons were identified. For example, family friction, polarisation, fear of speech and distrust in the political process. All of these factors led many participants to become less politically interested and thus alter their social media practices.

- **Family friction**

One participant reported that one reason behind avoiding posting personal views was to avoid backlash with users in his social network who did not share the same beliefs:

“My friends and family used to interfere in my opinion on Facebook. We sometimes argue. So to not risk or damage my relationship with my relative or friend, I do not post about politics on Facebook too much. Rather, I use Twitter for political discussion because not all of them are there on Twitter. So Facebook for family and Twitter for politics” (B-M-08-PRO)

It is interesting to see how social relations might limit people’s freedom of speech, particularly in the complex tribal system of Libya, thereby restricting the development of healthy democratic discussion.

- **Polarisation**

Chaos and deep polarisation in the social media environment led to political disengagement. For example, one participant commented:

“I am a friendly person. I don’t like to be a part of a discussion where users are engaging in hostile discussions and arguments. Unfortunately, some Facebook pages have turned to be a space of conflict” (T-M-04-PRO)

He further stated:

“You know, there is too much noise online. It is just a lot of conflicting opinions and debates. You don’t know what to take or who to believe. It is something really annoying” (T-M-04-PRO)

This demonstrates how increased polarisation in the online environment might turn off people from politics. In this way, social media did not serve as a democratic space bringing people together but served as a space of conflict that might lead to further division and polarisation, while leading some to political withdrawal.

Another participant shared a similar view. She refrained from contributing in any political activities either online or offline because:

“Practising politics in Libya is still immature. We have become jaded from the civil war and its implication on our life. We already had enough in reality; no one

wanted more noise on Facebook. I deleted most of the Facebook pages that spread hate and negativity. I don't want to be involved in endless trivial and hostile discussions” (T-F-05-PRO)

This is another piece of evidence showing how participants increasingly withdrew from political participation because of the growing polarisation and chaos in the online environment.

- **Fear of speech**

Some participants preferred not to take part in online discussion if there was threat to their safety. For example, one interviewee said:

“Everybody is worrying about their safety and security. The security situation has deteriorated in Libya. The government is no longer in control. No one can help you if you get into trouble. So, it is better to not get involved in discussions that you know may lead to harm” (T-M-16-PRO)

- **Distrust in political process**

While some participants expressed concerns regarding the worsening security situation, and how this might have limited their ability to participate in politics freely and openly, others reflected a feeling of political inefficacy and distrust of the political process. As one participant commented:

“[...] what social media can do if you are fighting countries such UAE, Qatar. They are fuelling the armed groups on the ground with weapons and money [...] and of course all of this is with the blessing of America. Basically, you are fighting the USA and other Western countries. The current government just are tools in their hands” (B-F-10-PRO)

This statement cast doubt on the capacity of political practice and the efficiency of the ultimate outcome of political participation.

Overall, the examples above suggest that there is a common trend of withdrawing from politics among the study participants due to the country's chaotic situation.

6.2.10.2 Types of non-political social media activities

While participants seemed to reduce their political activities, they simultaneously returned to using social media for non-political practices such as social communication, sharing

information and knowledge, entertainment, commercialisation and documenting events. These activities are discussed below:

- **Entertainment, social communication and sharing knowledge**

One of the most common reported activities was the use of social media for entertainment, social communication and knowledge sharing. For example:

“Currently Instagram is my favourite online space. I like photography and I can share my photos there away from the headache caused by Facebook” (T-M-04-PRO)

Another participant turned from being politically active to engage in sharing knowledge and information related to her expertise as a medical student:

“I have joined an Arab translation team on social media since 2014, and also a Libyan team since 2016. I did some voluntary work at the beginning but then it has become a paid job to translate knowledge from other languages into Arabic. I think this is how social media should be used rather than spreading hate and discontent” (T-F-05-PRO)

Another example of moving away from politics was:

“I am an admin of one of the popular Facebook pages. The page’s orientation was political in the past. However, we have started posting things about sport, technology or any other interesting things that young people like. We are trying to ease people’s feelings of distress, and avoid politics as much as we can, although we post news from time to time. You know one cannot detach himself completely from reality” (T-M-16-PRO)

The above quotation suggests an important transformation in the online content on social media. This change draws our attention to how Facebook page administrators and influential Twitter users could act as ‘gatekeepers’ and might control in some way the nature of the content, and consequently the nature of discussion.

- **Commercialisation**

One noteworthy trend all participants noticed was the use of Facebook for online marketing business. Participants stated that social media platforms largely shifted to become commercial spaces and an effective marketing tool for start-ups. It was reported that many

Facebook pages and groups had been established mainly for commercial profit purposes. As one participant, an administrator of a popular Facebook page, commented:

“Recently, our Facebook page changed to be primarily commercial. We provide mainly advertising services such as creating adverts for new restaurants, cafés or whatever for a certain amount of money” (T-M-16-PRO)

Another interviewee also reported that he established a Facebook page specifically to boost his own business and make a profit:

“Look, there were some studies that said that people who use social media were able to increase their income by 10%. So, I have created a Facebook page for marketing related to my work. It helped me a lot to boost my business” (B-M-22-ANTI)

The use of social media for marketing/start-ups and civic projects was not only common among men but also between women. A number of participants highlighted the importance of social media in empowering women and giving them space to negotiate their role in society practising different types of activities. As one participant commented:

“After the uprising, both male and female users used social media to discuss different issues about society or related to Libya’s current situation. Women also established many start-up projects online ranging from selling food to freelance work” (T-F-24-ANTI)

This quote suggests that social media helped to empower women and promote their civic and economic participation. This finding is important in terms of Fraser’s argument of subordinate groups (Fraser, 1990). Unlike the Habermasian concept of a single public sphere which was formulated around the interests of the male-dominant bourgeois, social media also gave a space to LW to express their interests and act more independently in society. By including these alternative groups, the egalitarian principle in society may be represented, and the subordinate groups therefore can communicate particular needs and interests (Fraser, 1990).

Overall, this noteworthy trend of the use of Facebook for online marketing of businesses suggests that the significance of social media as a space for political discussion might witness a decline. The reason for this is that the increase in commercial content could limit

the capacity of social media as a source of political information which might stimulate public debate. This point resonates with Habermas's point regarding the decline of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989). The argument of Habermas lies mainly in the idea that the bourgeois public sphere witnessed a decline because of the increasing power of commercial corporations that turned people to consumers rather than critical citizens (Habermas, 1989). In the same manner, therefore, the promises of social media to create public sphere might also be threatened by this growing phenomenon of commercialisation.

- **Documentation**

Despite the increase in different social and commercial activities online, social media still served as a common source of different types of information and documentation. There were many examples reported by different participants suggesting that social media was increasingly used to observe individuals and spot government officials' wrongdoings. For example:

“Last week, there was a widespread image on social media showing a security guard organising crowds in front of a bank in a violent way. Someone took a photo of him and uploaded it on social media. This photo aroused feelings of anger in the Libyan street and on social media. The army reacted to this by arresting this person straightaway” (B-F-10-PRO)

This example suggests that people did not only use social media to find information, but they were themselves creating content by pulling out their phones to document and spot wrongdoings and misconducts. This phenomenon of acting as watchdogs was termed “sousveillance” by Steve Mann, meaning that citizens can employ their camera devices to observe, monitor and document different events and incidents (Mann et al., 2003). In this manner, information can be conveyed to a wider public, which in turn might lead to them putting pressure on government or official bodies, requiring them to react. Therefore, this could have future implications on establishing a more transparent environment and holding people accountable for their actions.

However, the lack of information technology infrastructure could be a real barrier to people acting as watchdogs or transmitting information. Although there was some improvement in the internet service in Libya in 2009 (Freedom House, 2015), it would seem that technical factors still impacted on the use of social media in the country. For example, one participant from Sabha commented:

“In Libya, the speed of the internet is poor and the cost is high compared to the services provided. In my city, Sabha, we still face problems with weak internet connection. Not only in Sabha; even in Tripoli and other main cities they also have similar issues. Personally, I think if the services improved, social media could play a better role. For example, everybody could have their say and share their views across the country. Also, I think by improving the telecommunication infrastructure, less fact would be manipulated. What I mean is we are now mostly relying on recorded videos and photos which can easily be edited and fabricated. So, if we have good internet, people can go live instead of recording. I think the future is for live video streaming. If this happened, I think less rumour and more credible information could be shared” (S-M-21-UNC)

In this way, ordinary people can potentially become ‘citizen journalists’, and consumers of the content can themselves become producers. This might increase their chances of producing political participation in a way that contributes to facilitating a dialogue about different issues of public interest.

6.2.11 Summary

The findings above demonstrate various social media uses, activities and experiences in the second stage of Libya’s post-revolutionary dynamics (2014-2016). Compared to the early stage of the post-uprising, participants recently placed less trust in social media content. In general, participants retained a healthy scepticism in the way they looked at online content. They developed various approaches to check the accuracy of information and news using different verification strategies (e.g. Google Images, family and friends, verified accounts, etc.). Participants also appeared to be less overtly affective because of the increase of misinformation and disinformation. In fact, some of them reflected a sort of desensitised attitude towards violent or emotional content they saw online.

The study also revealed that Libyan society, which recently became more ideologically fragmented, produced a more complex dynamic that is simultaneously more inclusive of Gaddafi loyalists online or offline. Participants, to some extent, claimed or reflected a sense of tolerance and acceptance to others who held different views from them, although a few were not willing to listen to their opponents. This sense of inclusion was not only in relation to ideological beliefs. The study identified another type of inclusion in relation to gender. It was observed that social media had the potential to include more women’s voices. In the

post-uprising period, for example, it was observed that more female participants (regardless of their stance) engaged in online political discussions at some point in time (e.g. sharing information or personal views, expressing solidarity, commenting on political events). However, regardless of gender, it was found that the majority of participants became increasingly less interested in politics in recent times due to many reasons, such as polarisation, fear of speech and distrust in the political process while losing faith in the revolution. Therefore, they withdrew partly from politics and turned back to practise non-political activities (e.g. entertainment, socialising, sharing knowledge and commercialisation, etc.).

6.3 Chapter overview

This chapter has presented young people's social media uses and the observed changes in their online practices and experiences in relation to the unfolding political events and everyday life of the post-uprising period (late 2011-2016). It has illuminated how the 2011 revolution began with hope and optimism, but it ended with apprehension, confusion and polarisation. While the immediate aftermath of the uprising witnessed a vibrant political environment, in which young participants engaged with different political activities and practices, the subsequent struggle for power and accompanying instability fostered negative trends such as self-censorship, contention and polarisation. Social networks changed from being vibrant political spaces to ones of verbal harassment and argumentation that led many to abandon political participation. Instead of practising politics, participants moved largely to use social media for entertainment, social interaction, documenting events and online marketing business. Overall, the findings suggest that the use of social media by young Libyans continued to expand and shift over time and circumstances.

Chapter 7: Facebook analysis

The findings presented in this chapter report on the qualitative content analysis of 17327 messages (posts and comments) posted on two selected Facebook pages, the LW revolutionary page, and LI anti-revolutionary page, over a 3-day period during the first five anniversaries of the revolution. The purpose of this analysis was to contribute to achieving the main aim of the thesis, which seeks to explore the nature of the emergent networked public sphere and its evolution over time. To do so, the Facebook data were examined with the following questions in mind:

1. How do users articulate their political views on Facebook in the post-revolutionary period? i.e. how rational are their discussions? Are their messages informational or emotional in nature? What are the dominant types of these messages?
2. Does posting behaviour differ between the two pages or change over time in terms of diversity and inclusivity, and how different actors (admin vs. users) are using the platform?

The chapter presents each page individually by first providing an overview of the page, followed by general patterns and trends that are noted regarding the nature of users' discussions. Then it reports on a number of findings which emerged from the analysis of posts and comments. Where applicable, the concepts of the public sphere and networked public(s) and their related critiques were applied to reflect on the emergent findings.

7.1 The LW revolutionary Facebook page

7.1.1 Overview of the page

The LW Facebook page was set up around a social topic in November 2010, nearly three months before the uprising occurred. However, as described in its 'About' section, the page dedicated its online space to supporting the 2011 protests, disseminating revolutionary information and defending the right to revolution. After the fall of the regime, the page continued to take this revolutionary stance, gaining widespread popularity among users. At the time of data collection (February 2016), the page had reached 1389914 followers.

The total number of Facebook messages collected from this page was 11660, comprised of posts and comments (those posted by the page administrator(s) and those posted by users). Table 7.1 shows the breakdown of this extracted content by the type of message (post or comment) at each anniversary.

Table 7.1. The breakdown of messages on the LW Facebook page for a 3-day period

Types of messages			
Year	Posts	Comments	Total
2012	21	468	489
2013	36	563	599
2014	59	2917	2976
2015	57	3816	3873
2016	41	3682	3723
Total	214	11446	11660

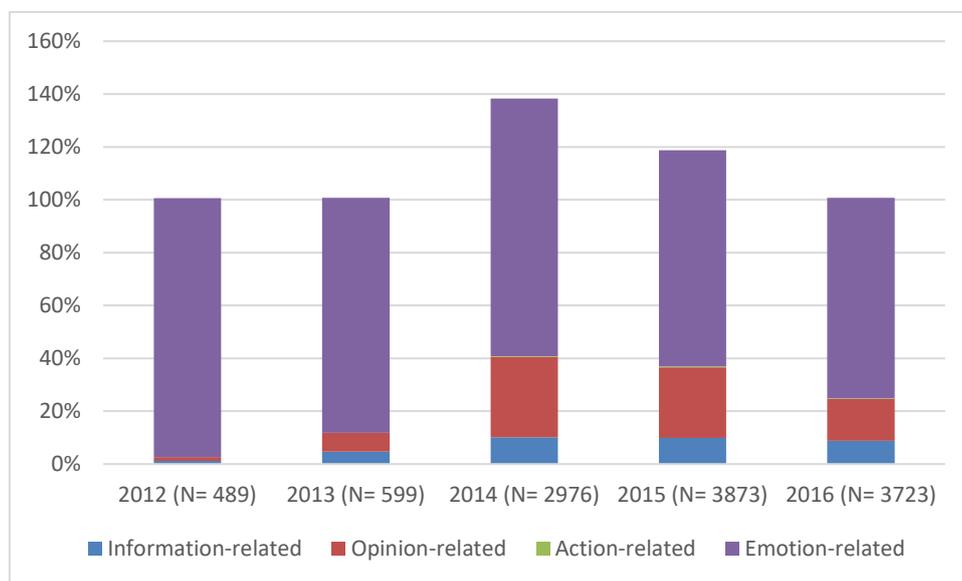
As can be seen from the table, the number of Facebook messages varied greatly between anniversaries. Unlike the small amount of content extracted in the first two anniversaries, a general trend of growth in the amount of messages was remarkable on the last three anniversaries of the uprising. This growth in content, which reveals the growing level of interaction on this page, may have been associated with the continuous increase in the number of Facebook users in the country (Freedom House, 2015). In addition, these numbers, which suggest increasing then stabilising participation, could perhaps mean that people were starting to lose interest in politics.

However, at the time of writing (2018), it was found that the entire LW Facebook page had surprisingly disappeared from Facebook. The disappearance of this page means losing its entire collection of digital content, including thousands of posts, photos, and videos that narrate and document many critical events that took place in the post-revolution period. In losing such a massive amount of information, there might be no possibility of recovery, and we are missing out on a contemporary archive of memory records that relate to a critical time in Libya's post-uprising period. The risk of losing the past reflects the fragility of social media. It shows how this technology might have a negative impact on the development of the public sphere because it might create temporary spaces for discussion and documentation rather than allowing for preservation. Thus, a part of a rich and feverish period of digital history might slip away, and the next generation might not be able to learn about it.

7.1.2 General patterns and trends

Following the coding scheme described previously in the methodology chapter to understand how Facebook was used in Libya's post-uprising period, four major categories of content were identified: *Information-related*, *Opinion-related*, *Action-related* and *Emotion-related*. Each of these major categories is comprised of sub-categories. Before exploring them in detail, the study first presents these major themes to provide an overall understanding of the nature of the discussion taking place on the 'LW' Facebook page (see figure 7.1 below).

Figure 7.1 Distribution of the main categories of the LW Facebook messages¹⁷.



By aggregating the number of messages (both posts and comments) within each main theme the *Emotion-related* and *Opinion-related* messages were found to be the most predominant on each anniversary. *Information-related* and *Action-related* messages were rare or less common.

This suggests that the online political discussion occurring on this Facebook page was more emotional in nature than cognitive, which by no means constitutes a perfect picture of a critical-rational public sphere as conceived by Habermas (1989). Rather, this finding is consistent with that of Papacharissi (2015) who views social media as a channel for affective expression and stories that connect people together in historical moments. This prevalence of emotional over cognitive components does not necessarily mean that the page

¹⁷ Since the categories are not mutually exclusive (the same message can fall into multiple categories), the percentages do not add up to 100%.

lacked any democratic value. In fact, such expressions constitute an important aspect of the online political discussion, and help us to understand the practices of the networked publics.

7.1.3 Post analysis

After providing an overall analysis, the study took a closer look at the messages in more detail in order to capture the different uses of Facebook: more specifically, of admin(s) and users. Therefore, the study distinguished between posts and comments instead of lumping them together in a single phase of analysis, while integrating them when necessary when presenting the findings to provide a context. According to Kim, Kim, & Yoo (2014), “posts and comments are designed to function differently in SNSs [social networking services]. That is, a post is designed to express an independent opinion or to convey first-hand information, while a comment is designed to express one’s opinions related to a previous piece of information, or to make an observation or statement” (p. 146).

As shown previously in table 7.1, there were 214 total admin posts for the LW revolutionary Facebook page. These posts were classified according to the coding scheme of this study. As a result, it was found that these admin posts mainly fell into four categories: *Giving information*, *Requesting information*, *Posting criticism* and *Solidarity* (see Table 7.2¹⁸).

Table 7.2. Category classification of LW Facebook page posts

Year	2012 (N. of posts = 21)	2013 (N. of posts =36)	2014 (N. of posts = 59)	2015 (N. of posts =57)	2016 (N. of posts =41)
Category	Frequency and %	Frequency and %	Frequency and %	Frequency and %	Frequency and %
Giving information	1 (4.7%)	9 (25%)	37 (62.7)	46 (80.7%)	37 (90.2%)
Requesting information	0 (0%)	1 (2.7%)	2 (3.3%)	3 (5.2%)	5 (12.1%)
Posting criticism	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (6.7%)	4(7%)	0 (0%)
Solidarity	20 (95.2%)	30 (83.3%)	28 (47.5%)	18 (31.5%)	11 (26.8%)

As can be seen from the table, the posts on the first two anniversaries of the uprising were largely used to express solidarity with the revolution rather than to give information related to it, or associated with its post-events. These posts included, but were not limited to, nationalistic slogans and victorious expressions. For example:

¹⁸ To provide an easy-read table, only categories that these posts fell into are displayed rather than providing the entire coding scheme.

“No East No West. Libya is one country!” (LW60/12)

*“We stand together; we bond together until we build the new Libya. Libya free”
(LW101/12)*

“Allahu Akbar¹⁹. Viva 17 February revolution!” (LW15/13)

These different forms of expressions of solidarity were sometimes attached to images of the revolutionary festivals that took place across the country to commemorate the anniversary of the revolution, reflecting the euphoria that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the revolution.

In the following anniversaries, the data demonstrated a major change in the posting trend. The analysis identified a general trend of decline in posts of solidarity, while showing a dramatic increase in the frequency of informational posts, coupled with a rise in the posts that contained criticism. The reason behind this changing trend of admin posts was perhaps due to the violent events that erupted in the country in 2014²⁰ (Freedom House, 2015). Many of these posts, for example, conveyed information about the fast-changing events as they happened, such as political announcements, political speeches, incidents of killings and explosion, deterioration of the security situation, terrorism, and governmental information. Illustrative examples of these posts follow:

“This is a copy of the statement of the Military Council of #Nalut regarding the parliament extension” (LW558/14)

*“Happening now! Dr. Mustafa Abushagur ²¹on #LibyaAl-alhrar TV channel”
(LW717/14)*

“Libya's oil militia leader Ibrahim Jadhran met U.S. & British military attachés outside of Libya” (LW321/15)

“Breaking: Human Rights Watch confirms the death of 3 children and their mother in the Egyptian airstrikes on the city of #Darna #Libya” (LW424/15)

¹⁹ Allahu Akbar (God is greater) is a term used by Muslims in their daily lives to remind themselves of God's vastness and power. It was used as a cheer in the Arab Spring.

²⁰ Libya has remained trapped by a standoff between different militants and armed groups since 2014.

²¹ Mustafa Abushagur is a Libyan politician who served as interim Deputy Prime Minister of Libya from 22 November 2011 to 14 November 2012 in Abdurrahim El-Keib's cabinet.

Interestingly, although these informational posts reflect Libya's dynamic political and security situation, there were no posts that were found to call for any type of action. The page admin(s) did not seem to emerge as an active agent for mobilisation. Rather, their posts demonstrated a high level of information-providing activities. These activities were not only in relation to political and security information, but also to different aspects of the post-revolutionary events such as information related to the commemoration of the revolution. These posts in particular often generated a conflict between users, who were either in agreement or disagreement with the idea of celebrating the anniversary of the revolution, as many appeared to lose faith in the revolution, particularly after 2014. (This is explained in more detail in the comment analysis section). Examples of these posts are:

“Despite the pain, we are #celebrating the fourth anniversary of the revolution! and we will do so until establishing a state of law, a state of welfare. The photo is from today's celebration event at the martyrs' square #Tripoli #Libya” (LW44/15)

*“Because of #freedom #democracy #martyrs, we are commemorating the fifth anniversary of the revolution. Allahu Akbar! #Misurata's public celebration #Libya. Pictured by M***” (LW1335/16)*

As can be seen, the above posts did not only document the celebratory events, but also expressed determination and continuous support to the revolutionary cause. Through referencing martyrs who rose up against the regime or emphasising the revolution principles, the admin(s) may have been trying to maintain the revolutionary spirit and reconnect public(s) to the revolutionary cause which seemed to have been shaken in recent years, as the comment analysis will show in the next section. It is also important to mention that these posts were coded as being both *Giving information* and *Solidarity*, following the non-mutually exclusive code approach adopted in this study, because they were not purely informational, but carried both information and emotional elements. These findings, therefore, further support the idea of ‘affective publics’ introduced by Papacharissi (2015) in which news, emotion and opinion are blended into one narrative.

What is also notable about the above examples, along with the other posts on this page, is that the majority of posts came in a visual format such as images and videos. This prevalence of visual materials can be seen as a strong indicator of the rise of the citizen journalism phenomenon, in which digitally equipped citizens can become an important source of information and news. Technology can help not only to post opinions and views,

but also to document particular moments and provide information about certain actions. The following table shows precisely the frequency distribution of different forms of posts on the LW Facebook page.

Table 7.3. The frequency distribution of the forms of posts

Post type	Year				
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Status	17	0	10	9	0
Photo	2	34	48	45	39
Video	2	1	1	3	2
Link	0	1	0	0	0
Total	21	36	59	57	41

7.1.4 Comment analysis

In this section, users' comments posted on the LW Facebook page, which were large in quantity (11446), were analysed and classified according to the coding scheme of the study (see the table below).

Table 7.4. The classification of the LW Facebook comments

Year	2012 (N. of comments = 468)	2013 (N. of comments = 563)	2014 (N. of comments = 2917)	2015 (N. of comments = 3816)	2016 (N. of comments = 3682)
Cognitive comments (No of comments and %)					
Information-related					
Giving information	5 (0.01%)	11 (3.3%)	217 (7.4%)	284 (7.4 %)	263 (7.1%)
Requesting information	0 (0%)	4 (0.8%)	46 (1.5%)	54 (1.4 %)	67 (1.8%)
Opinion-related					
Posting criticism	5 (0.01%)	30 (5.3%)	610 (20.7 %)	611 (16%)	445 (12%)
Distrust social media	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	103 (3.5%)	145 (3.7 %)	7 (0.1%)
Stating opinion	2 (0.4%)	13 (2.3%)	193 (6.6%)	276 (7.2%)	137 (3.7%)
Action-related					
Calling for action	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (0.2%)	17 (0.4%)	13 (0.3%)
Emotional comments (No. of comments and %)					
Emotion-related					
Concerns	0 (0%)	2 (0.3%)	276 (9.4%)	210 (5.5%)	111 (3.0%)

Sarcasm	0 (0%)	3 (0.5%)	69 (2.3%)	310 (8.1%)	303 (8.2 %)
Solidarity	301 (64.3%)	288 (50.1%)	1102 (37.7%)	734 (19.2 %)	1056 (28.6 %)
Optimism	125 (26.7%)	200 (35.5%)	76 (2.6%)	24 (0.6%)	21 (0.5%)
Sympathy	31 (6.6 %)	3 (0.5%)	495 (16.9%)	132 (3.4%)	183 (4.9%)
Sadness	0 (0%)	1 (0.1%)	301 (10.3%)	631 (16.5%)	431 (11.7%)
Anger	1 (0.2%)	8 (1.4 %)	379 (12.9%)	939 (24.6%)	704 (19.1%)
Words of comfort	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	176 (6%)	167 (4.3%)	5 (0.1%)
Other	16 (3.4%)	62 (11%)	108 (3.7%)	59 (1.5 %)	47 (1.2%)

As can be seen in the table, comments that were emotional and/or characterised by emotional elements were the most dominant type on every anniversary. On the first two anniversaries, for example, the page was used greatly to express positive feeling towards the revolution rather than sharing information or debating politics. The most prevalent category was the one expressing *Solidarity* (64.3%) (50.1%), followed by *Optimism* (26.7%) (35.5%), on the first and second anniversaries respectively. Comments that contained negative feelings such as *Anger*, *Sadness* or *Concerns* were very rare and mostly muted.

Bearing in mind that the page was revolutionary-oriented, the prevalence of positive emotions in this early stage of Libya’s post-uprising period was not surprising. Yet, what is important is that the dominance of this positive content indicates how homogeneous and coherent the narrative on this page was, suggesting that the page was mostly populated by like-minded users rather than diverse users. For example, in 2012, there was only one comment that interrupted the coherence of discussion on this page. In this comment, anger and discontent with the first revolution anniversary celebration was expressed:

“A bunch of idiots celebrating the new colonisation^{22!}” (LW78/12)

Interestingly, no comments were found in response to this comment. Instead, the following comments continued to express feelings of revolutionary pride and solidarity, and formed more coherent discussion.

On one hand, this lack of the representation of the other opposing viewpoints demonstrates how Facebook can encourage polarisation in which users just mix with others who agree with them or are like themselves. On the other hand, it could suggest that others who may

²² This term is often used to refer to the West’s interference through NATO in Libya dating back to 2011.

have different views (e.g. pro-regime) may have feared voicing their own opinion on this page, while additionally the page might not have been a welcoming space for its opponents. In 2013, for example, the flow of some conversations suggests that there were some comments that had been deleted. The remaining comments around these conversations show that there seems to be an argument between pro- and anti-revolution users. Although it is impossible to know who removed these comments (this could have been done by admin(s) or by users themselves who perhaps feared unwanted consequences or changed their minds), the important point here is that the LW Facebook page did not seem to serve as an entirely open environment because some users were being excluded or they excluded themselves. The latter, however, suggests that just as people have the right to express and debate their opinion freely, they also have the ‘right to be forgotten’ (Sarikakis & Winter, 2017). In this light, people have a right to change their mind – if someone perhaps posted something they later regretted and/or disagreed with, should they have a right to remove that post from a democratic public space? This is a problematic question, but it suggests that post deletion has a complex relationship to ideas of democracy and the public sphere.

For the recent anniversaries of the uprising, the analysis shows no sign of missing content, though it is important to acknowledge that it could be difficult, if not impossible, sometimes to spot such an issue, particularly within a large data set and within non-homogeneous discussion, which is something increasingly noted on the later anniversaries of the uprising. At this late stage, the focus of the content was found to have shifted from certain revolutionary narratives towards more diverse issues. The analysis shows that there was more information being shared, and more opinions and emotions being expressed. For example, users increasingly used the page for *Giving Information*, with 217 comments in 2014 (7.4%), 284 comments in 2015 (7.4 %), and 263 comments in 2016 (7.1%). Most of these comments were posted in order to convey first-hand observations and experiences. The following comments, for example, are users’ responses to the page admin who was gathering updates regarding the security situation of some areas across the country:

“Janzour is 100%” (LW3/14)

“Just heard a big boom!! in Benghazi a few minutes ago” (LW12/14)

“2 really big bangs in #Tripoli as well but it could be just a bonfire. Not sure”

(LW15/14)

The page was also used to *Request Information*, through which users sought information and clarifications about different matters such as:

“Anyone know what time the prime minister's speech is today and where to watch it?”
(LW200/15)

“I heard the sound of a spy plane a few hours ago over Tripoli. Did anyone else hear it?”
(LW102/15)

These informational messages show the importance of Facebook as a source of information, and how this platform facilitated individuals' connections within and across different geographical areas, allowing them to exchange relevant information and experiences.

Besides the use of Facebook to disseminate information and news, users also used this page to voice their criticism. The analysis revealed an extraordinary amount of *Criticism*, presented in 610 comments in 2014 (20.7 %), 611 comments in 2015 (16%), and 438 comments in 2016 (11.8%). Users under this category vividly expressed criticism and dissatisfaction of a variety of topics including, political parties and groups, militias and public figures, tribal and regional issues, oil production, government(s) and authorities. Examples of these comments were as follows:

“Callers for federalisation play dirty. They are feeding people's needs to gain more support #Libya #federalisation” (LW100/14)

“Italy is an authoritarian country over Libya. It interferes in the Tripoli region. Cyrenaica will be better off seceding from Libya and rebuilding. Defend Cyrenaica. Why fight over the rest?” (LW591/15)

“I couldn't get it. How Ibrahim Jadhran, who blockaded oil to stop it being sold without proper flow meters, today himself sold oil without meters. We should separate Tripoli from Cyrenaica!” (LW98/15)

“We ended up having so many Presidents that it's hard to keep count. President of House of Representatives #Saleh, President of High State Council #Mishri and President of Government of National Accord #Sarraj. But nothing gets done. They say, when everyone is leader, no one is leader” (LW529/16)

These various topics related to many aspects of Libya's troubled transition were often controversial and tended to generate a lot of conflict and clashes among users. One of many

hot topics that surfaced in the post-2011 online discussion was regional and tribal tension, which was always a contentious and recurrent theme throughout the dataset. The terms such as *Tripoli region* and *Cyrenaica region* presented in the above comments reflect a deep fragmentation and division within Libyan society.

At this late stage (2014/15/16), the comments in general were mostly written in a negative tone. Negative emotions such as *Anger*, *Sadness*, *Sarcasm*, *Concerns*, etc. were found to be frequently expressed. Among these negative emotions, for example, *Anger* was by far the most common category. Comments under this category, which contained flaming and personal attacks, were presented in 418 comments (14.3%) in 2014, 936 comments (24.5%) in 2015, and 767 comments (20.8%) in 2016. The nature of these conflictual comments became sharper and bolder, particularly in 2015 due to a video released by ISIS showing what they claimed to be the executions of 21 Egyptian Copts in Libya in Sirte, a city lying on the Libyan coast halfway between Tripoli and Benghazi. The release of this video coincided with the fourth anniversary of the revolution, inviting a lot of anger and conflict among users, particularly between those who wanted to celebrate the anniversary and others who disagreed with this. The following conversation illustrates this issue:

*“What p***ed me off is how can some people still celebrate the anniversary while the country is blowing up and controlled by ISIS? #idiots” (LW55/15)*

“Let them celebrate because #Rats can’t simply admit that Gaddafi was right and their fake revolution invented by #NATO brought us ISIS!! Death!! Poverty!! Division!! and so on. If they can’t see this, they are so blind to the truth!” (LW56/15)

“Celebrating the anniversary is something narrow-minded people can’t understand. It is beyond their thinking and it is not our job to convince them!!!” (LW57/15)

Despite the aggressive and hostile nature of these comments, they reflect that the online discussion was not only composed of like-minded users but also non-like-minded. The second comment in the above conversation, for example, appeared to be posted by a pro-regime user, which was something increasingly noted throughout the last three anniversaries under study. This increase in the presence of the pro-regime stance, along with other ideological perspectives, suggests that the page opened up for diverse publics to participate in the debate. This openness was not only on a local level but also on a regional level. To illustrate, this terrorist incident linked to ISIS stimulated several Egyptians to participate in the online discussion on this page, but they featured more use of inflammatory

language. Although there was no definitive evidence to prove that these comments originated from Egypt, it suggests that the LW Facebook page was an open and accessible space for individuals with diverse views, allowing Libyans and non-Libyans to interact in a highly decentralised manner.

However, while some users were interacting and conflicting regarding different ideological perspective, others were questioning the credibility of social media content. These comments that expressed suspicion of social media information, which was coded under the *Distrust Social Media* category, were more frequent in 2014, with 103 comments (3.5%), and in 2015, with 145 comments (3.7 %). This is perhaps because of the critical events happening in Libya in that time. In 2014, for example, the majority of comments classified under this category were responses to a photo post showing protests in Benghazi, supporting the extension of the Tripoli-based General National Congress²³, despite the fact that the city was commonly known for standing against its extension. In 2015, the release of the ISIS video discussed above was the post at which the majority of *Distrust Social Media* comments were directed. Illustrative examples of such comments include:

“This #ISIS video looks fake... Hollywood type editing. I feel the decapitations of the Copts never happened!” (LW112/15)

“I don’t trust this video but this is obviously the coast of Sirte but it could also be photoshopped! Confusing!” (LW115/15)

“Here’s a good analysis of the debunked “fake ISIS video”: <https://www.me...>”
(LW116/15)

Yet, questioning the credibility of these posts does not necessarily mean that the information they carried was fake, but it may give insights and reflect a level of awareness about how users consumed social media content, and how they applied a critical lens to topics they read.

While some users were doubting and questioning the credibility of some social media information, others appeared to lose their revolutionary spirit. In fact, there was mounting disillusion and despair characterising the content on the later anniversaries, which could be

²³ The GNC was the legislative authority of Libya for two years following the end of the uprising. It was elected by popular vote on 7 July 2012, and took power from the National Transitional Council on 8 August 2012.

a result of and a response to Libya's escalating uncertainty and instability. The content largely reflected people's struggle for safety and security and their limited access to medical care, electricity, and food. All of these problems and more were translated into feelings of *Sadness, Concerns, Sympathy, and Sarcasm*, which characterised a large amount of comments. Examples of these negative emotions are illustrated below.

"It is just sad how things ended up! The sacrifices that people made and the ultimate price they paid to bring about freedom and democracy. So far they have produced neither. Did the Revolution devour its children? Wondering whether it was all worth it."

(LW50/16)

"People waiting in endless lines in front of banks for long hours or days, just to hear the phrase 'No money today, Sir'. I don't even want to think of how the future will be. R.I.P.

Libya 😞" (LW140/16)

"How sad to be displaced in your country. I wish that the tragedy that some people are experiencing ends soon" (LW503/16)

"We should build a Lego airport! So the next time militias decide to fight near an airport it is easy to take it apart 😊😊" (LW44/15)

Besides the prevalence of negative emotions, *Solidarity* feelings were also common on the last three anniversaries under study (see table 7.4 above). However, the expressions of solidarity that users were sharing were not only in relation to the revolutionary stance or to the old regime. In fact, many comments were showing tribal affiliation, or voicing support to either of the rival regional militias that had emerged since 2014. Examples are illustrated below:

"Cyrenaica is on the verge of victory to build a real military. Keep going! Operation Dawn must be dismantled!" (LW66/15)

"Definitely and without any doubt I support Operation Dawn, the group who sacrifices themselves to fight ISIS in Sirte" (LW87/15)

"I am encouraged to see Libya getting serious military support. Finally feels like there is a plan! I am from the West of Libya and support #theLibyanmilitary" (LW71/15)

These comments demonstrated how political discussions on this Facebook page were polarised. Users seemed to be deep and extreme in their stances, which often led to the

creation of an area of tension and conflict. As highlighted previously, however, the presence of the oppositional views suggested that the discussion was, to a certain degree, diverse, and thus brought different groups together despite their different affiliations.

Yet, while some users appeared to take a more extreme stance on an issue, others showed a level of rationality and tolerance to the opposite view. Their comments were likely to contain balanced views and were devoid of personal attacks or harsh criticism (regardless of users' stance on an issue). This type of comment was classified under the *Stating Opinion* category, with 193 comments in 2014 (6.6%), 276 comments in 2015 (7.2%), and 137 comments in 2016 (3.7%). The following is an example of a conversation characterised by a civil discussion on federalisation, a topic that tended to produce a lot of heat in Libya:

“There are no benefits to federalisation in Libya, none. Too long for me to list. But I am willing to talk” (LW301/14)

“Look, federalisation does not mean division of #Libya – it's only ‘division of power’ under the federal government of Libya & constitution” (LW302/14)

“I understand federalisation as a political system though federalisation is not an answer... I think it would lead to an eventual split if you understand what I mean #Libya united, not split” (LW303/14)

It can be seen that these comments reflected users' willingness to interact with one another in a rational and respectful manner despite their disagreement. Although this way of user interaction could be considered important because it allowed users to critically debate and deliberate over what may constitute the common good, they were low in frequency compared to the other categories.

Overall, the analysis of this page has showed that users' discussion was more likely to be emotional and intense rather than rational. The content changed from being positive in the early anniversaries into more hostile discussion in the later anniversaries. The political discussion on the LW Facebook page appeared to be highly polarised, while simultaneously diverse, suggesting the fragmented, polarised and chaotic nature of the emergent Libyan networked sphere.

7.2 The LI anti-revolutionary Facebook page

7.2.1 Overview of the page

The LI Facebook page introduced itself as “*The largest page for Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s loyalists on Facebook*”. The page clearly stated its aim as follows: “*Our mission is to cleanse Libya inch by inch, house by house, home by home, alleyway by alleyway, person by person, until the country is cleansed of dirt and scum*”. These words were taken literally from Muammar Gaddafi’s speech delivered in the early days of the uprising, in which he vowed to hunt down his opponents, who he branded as “*drug addicts, jihadist and rats*”. This page also achieved broad popularity and its number of followers reached around 183805 at the time of data collection (February 2016). The total Facebook messages collected from this page was 5667, comprised of posts and comments. Table 7.5 shows the breakdown of the extracted content by the type of message (posts and comments) on each anniversary under the study.

Table 7.5. The breakdown of messages on the LI Facebook page for a 3-day period

Types of messages			
Year	Posts	Comments	Total
2012	60	458	518
2013	56	1716	1772
2014	94	2531	2625
2015	17	417	434
2016	30	288	318
Total	257	5410	5667

As can be seen from the table, the number of Facebook messages varied greatly between the anniversaries. While the number of messages extracted in the first anniversary of the uprising was small, there was an overall increase of the number of retrieved messages in the second and third anniversaries, before the frequency of messages significantly dropped off in 2015 and 2016. The reason behind this fluctuation of the page content is difficult to predict because it could potentially have a number of interpretations. It could be because people may have become less or more interested in discussing politics on this page, thus reducing or increasing their activities, or because users may have been fearful or gained

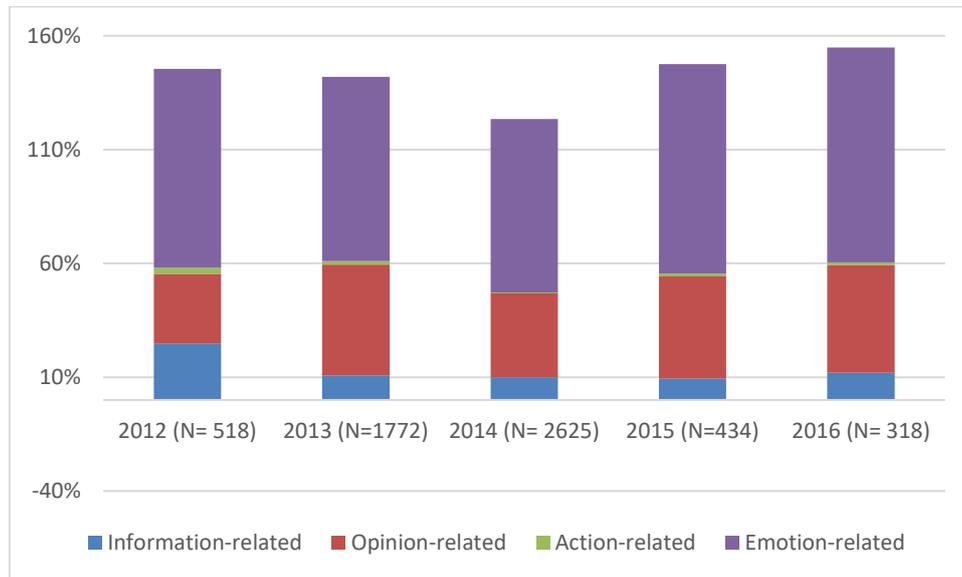
more confidence to speak their opinion at some points in time, or because other pages became more popular.

At the time of writing (2018), the page was re-visited and it was found that there had been a sharp decline in its online activities. In fact, the most recent activity on the page was posted on 31 August 2017. This means that the page had moved from being an active to an inactive space of discussion and expression. This changing trend demonstrates the fragility and fluid nature of social media, where connected groups may get disconnected at any point of time.

7.2.2 General patterns and trends

On this page, there were a total of 5667 messages (posts and comments) collected for analysis. Following the coding scheme described in the methodology section, these messages fell into four major categories: *Information-related*, *Opinion-related*, *Action-related*, and *Emotion-related*. To provide an overall understanding of the nature of the discussion on the LI Facebook page, the study first provides sum totals/percentages for each of the main categories (see figure 7.2). Similar to the LW Facebook page, *Emotion-related* messages were found to be the most prevalent on each anniversary, followed by *Opinion-related* messages. *Information-related* and *Action-related* were less common or very scarce. This suggests that the LI Facebook page was used mostly as a space to vent emotions rather than sharing information or discussing opinions and views.

Figure 7.2. Distribution of the main categories of the LI Facebook messages²⁴.



7.2.3 Post analysis

Out of the 5667 messages extracted from the LI Facebook page, a total of 257 admin posts were organised according to the coding scheme described in the methodology section. Findings revealed that the majority of posts mainly fell into five categories: *Giving information*, *Criticism*, *Calls for action*, *Solidarity* and *Anger* (see table 7.6²⁵).

Table 7.6. Category classification of LI Facebook page posts

Year	2012 (N. of posts = 60)	2013 (N. of posts =56)	2014 (N. of posts =94)	2015 (N. of posts =17)	2016 (N. of posts =30)
Category	Frequency and %	Frequency and %	Frequency and %	Frequency and %	Frequency and %
Giving information	50 (83.3%)	49 (87.5%)	68 (71.3)	12 (70.5%)	20 (66.6%)
Posting criticism	9 (15%)	19 (33.9)	17 (18%)	3 (17.6%)	10 (33.3%)
Calls for action	1 (1.6%)	3 (5.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Solidarity	15 (25%)	7 (12.5%)	9 (9.5%)	2 (11.7%)	4 (13.3%)
Anger	11 (18.3%)	12 (21.4%)	11 (11.7%)	5 (29.4%)	4 (13.3%)

²⁴ Since the categories are not mutually exclusive and the same message can fall into multiple categories, the percentages do not add up to 100%.

²⁵ To provide an easy-read table, only categories that LI posts fell into are displayed rather than providing the entire coding scheme.

As can be seen from the table, informational posts were by far the most common posts on each anniversary of the uprising. These posts mainly conveyed the latest breaking news and information, covering a range of topics such as updates on the Green Resistance²⁶, violent incidents or clashes (e.g. reports of attacking, killing, kidnapping, injuries), reference to external interference in Libya (e.g. the West, Qatar), or views of intellectuals or journalists drawn from newspapers. For example:

“Gaddafi’s supporters rise up in civil disobedience against the government, leaving thousands of seats empty in schools and workplaces” (LI48/12)

“The Guardian: Britain’s ‘Floating Shop Window’ signals massive undeclared arms race in Libya. <http://www.facebook.com/> ...” (LI230/13)

“An explosion (probably car bomb) has occurred in Omar Almokhtar street. #Tripoli #Libya” (LI286/13)

“Breaking: Nicolas Sarkozy under investigation over 2012 campaign funds. <http://www.facebook.com/> ...” (LI279/16)

As can be seen from the examples above, some of the posts included links to external sources to provide users with the original or actual information regarding certain news or events. This included links to social media websites (e.g. blogs) or links to local or even international news articles (e.g. The Independent, The Guardian).

However, not all posts were purely informational in nature. In fact, some of them were found to be tinged with emotions such as *Solidarity* and *Anger* while also carrying information. Thus, they fit into multiple categories. An example of a non-mutually exclusive post is a photo post published in the fifth anniversary of the uprising. It showed a small group of people marching and raising Libya’s previous green flag in a city known for its alliance with the old regime. This post was coded as being both *Giving Information* and *Solidarity* because it did not only transmit information on the march, but also contained an expression of solidarity supporting this act, as illustrated below:

²⁶ A term often used to refer to supposed pro-Gaddafi forces.

*“Signs of Al-Jamahiria return today in **** city! We all stand with you guys! Keep going!” (LI76/16)*

This post, which communicated moments of enthusiasm and hope about the return of Al-Jamahiria, received a high level of user engagement. Al-Jamahiria is a term coined by Muammar al-Gaddafi in The Green Book to refer to Libya. The official name of Libya during the regime era was Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, which was changed to be State of Libya after the revolution. The majority of comments posted in response to this post demonstrated a great sense of solidarity with the act.

Interestingly, despite the page’s anti-revolutionary orientation, it was found that there were almost no posts containing calls for any type of action, even on the first two anniversaries where people’s feelings were likely to be much more intense. Only a very small number of *Action-related* posts were found (1 post in 2012, and 3 posts in 2013). The content of these posts mainly included calls for online action. Examples follow:

“Dear friends please participate in the vote on CNN website: Do you support the NATO intervention in Syria? Answer with NO plz!” (LI455/12)

“Please unfollow the Green Resistance Facebook page. It has been hacked!” (LI1001/13)

These examples above may exemplify how weak tie networks afforded by social media could facilitate individuals’ connections to encourage them to support a certain cause or take a specific action. However, the scarcity of this type of post suggests that the most important benefit of the LI Facebook page was to provide information and news rather than mobilising people to action.

Similar to the LW Facebook page, these informational posts came mostly in the form of visual materials, along with other communication modalities of text and links. This prevalence of visual material highlights the role of citizen journalists in documenting different events, and how they can become producers of information rather than passive recipients. The following table shows precisely the frequency distribution of the different forms of posts published on the LI Facebook page.

Table 7.7 The frequency distribution of the forms of posts

Post type	Year				
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Status	3	0	66	9	9
Photo	0	36	28	7	17
Video	16	6	0	0	4
Link	41	14	0	1	0
Total	60	56	94	17	30

7.2.4 Comment analysis

In this section, users' comments posted on the LI Facebook page were placed into categories that emerged through the coding process. The number of comments was analysed was 5410 (see the table below).

Table 7.8. The classification of the LI Facebook comments

Year	2012 (N. of comments = 458)	2013 (N. of comments = 1716)	2014 (N. of comments = 2531)	2015 (N. of comments = 417)	2016 (N. of comments =288)
Cognitive comments (No of comments and %)					
Information-related					
Giving information	40 (8.7%)	104 (6%)	137 (5.4%)	24 (5.7 %)	13 (4.5%)
Requesting information	39 (8.5)	40 (2.3%)	56 (2.2%)	5 (1.1 %)	5 (1.7%)
Opinion-related					
Posting criticism	133 (29%)	782 (45.5%)	904 (35.7 %)	166 (39.8%)	132 (45.8)
Distrust social media	11 (2.4)	32 (1.8)	26 (1%)	1 (0.2%)	3 (1%)
Stating opinion	5 (1%)	30 (1.7%)	22 (0.8%)	25 (5.9%)	8 (2.7%)
Action-related					
Calling for action	13 (2.8%)	24 (1.3%)	15 (0.5%)	6 (1.4%)	4 (1.3%)
Emotional comments (No of comments and %)					
Emotion-related					
Concerns	45 (9.8%)	59 (3.4%)	148 (5.8%)	41 (9.8%)	15 (5.2%)
Sarcasm	9 (1.9%)	184 (10.7%)	184 (7.2%)	34 (8.1%)	30 (10.4 %)
Solidarity	131 (28.6%)	301 (17.5%)	499 (19.7%)	95 (22.7%)	80 (27.7 %)
Optimism	10 (2.1%)	51 (2.9%)	50 (1.9%)	4 (0.9%)	11 (3.8%)
Sympathy	32 (6.9 %)	157 (9.1%)	162 (6.4%)	20 (4.7%)	4 (1.3%)
Sadness	80 (17.4%)	243 (14.1%)	218 (8.6%)	85 (20.3%)	50 (17.3%)

Anger	119 (25.9%)	405 (23.6 %)	595 (23.5%)	127 (30.4%)	90 (31.2%)
Words of comfort	1 (0.2%)	17 (0.9)	124 (4.8%)	6 (1.4%)	12 (4.1%)
Other	16 (3.4%)	13 (0.7%)	32 (1.2%)	7 (1.6 %)	3 (1 %)

As can be seen from the table, the most prevalent category on each anniversary was the one expressing *Criticism*. Users mainly indulged in a sustained denunciation of the revolution and its destructive aspects. The comments in general were littered with insults and inflammatory language, resulting in much overlap between the *Criticism* and *Anger* categories. Therefore, when criticism was made in a very aggressive tone and filled with extreme anger, the comment was coded as being both *Criticism* and *Anger*. Illustrations of these comments are provided below:

“After the U.S. sold WAR, its media stopped covering events on Libya, WHY? To hide the continued killing by their weapon supply! The thing is some people still believe that there is no purpose behind its military interference! Sometimes you just have to AAAHHH to feel better!!” (LI246/12)

“What do we expect from idiots who took the Zionist, Bernard Levy as a friend? The wolf in sheep’s clothing” (LI735/13)

Bernard Levy²⁷ was one of the external actors who made an appearance in Libya during the uprising to support the rebels. His role, as he stated in the media, was mainly that of linking members of the National Transitional Council²⁸ with NATO political leaders in Paris during the G-8 summit in March 2011 (before NATO launched Operation Odyssey Dawn²⁹). Levy was criticised frequently in the comments on each anniversary, particularly in relation to his Jewish roots and his Israeli connections, taking this as a basis to emphasise what users appeared to believe: that there was a Zionist Conspiracy regarding Libya, and a plan to help Israel and the West to assert complete hegemony over the region.

Such highly charged claims that mixed religion with politics often provoked excessive amounts of discontent and anger among users. In these discussions, users tended to reinforce each other’s views and ideas rather than countering them. The counter-argument,

²⁷ A French controversial philosopher and political activist. He is also one of the biggest defenders of Israel.

²⁸ NTC was the de facto government of Libya for a period during and after the Libyan uprising, in which rebel forces overthrew the Gaddafi regime.

²⁹ US-EU Military Operation against Libya (19 March - 31 October, 2011).

in fact, was rarely shared and often less likely to disrupt the coherence of the discussion on this page. The following comments, for example, in which users were calling on the admin(s) to take action to remove the revolution's supporters from the page, suggest that the LI Facebook page did not seem to serve as a welcoming environment for the opposite side of the argument, but rather, reflected a deep polarisation:

"Please admin wipe these traitors from the page!" (LI232/12)

"Take them out admin. This is not their place!!" (LI1094/13)

These examples suggest that the LI Facebook page was mainly occupied by like-minded users. In this way, it can be argued that the page had the potential to create an echo-chamber effect, making users more likely to interact with people they agreed with, and thus, it may have resulted in more polarisation and division.

This sense of political polarisation and intolerance, presented in the above *Action-related* examples, was also reflected by the minimal number of comments under the *Stating Opinion* category. This category, which mainly included balanced arguments between users no matter what their political orientations were, provided further evidence that the LI Facebook page had a tendency to mainly bring like-minded people together rather than enabling interaction between a diverse set of individuals.

In general, most of the content on the LI Facebook page was likely to be attuned to its stance. Unlike the diverse voices that characterised the LW Facebook page discussion on the later anniversaries, users on this page were more attached to their original cause. No matter the incident or the issue reported in the post, users mainly attributed or linked it to the fall of the regime. For example, in 2015, after Egypt launched raids in Libya as a response to the ISIS attack on the Coptic Egyptians, users were very likely to make direct reflective comments on the political vacuum that resulted from the fall of the regime. These reflections took different emotional forms (e.g. *Solidarity, Sarcasm, Anger*, etc.). For example, some comments of emotional solidarity, which was one of the most common categories in all anniversaries, referenced parts of Al-Gaddafi's speech that he delivered in the early days of the uprising, as illustrated below:

"Col. Gaddafi was a great leader with enormous vision. He warned of Al-Qaeda from the beginning when he said about the revolutionaries: 'This is Al-Qaeda. It's not my people.' We will continue his fight for the Green cause till the end" (LI52/2015)

Making reference to Muammar Al-Gaddafi himself or his speeches tended to evoke comments of solidarity and support for other like-minded users, in a way that demonstrated the importance of affect in creating links and connections among publics toward certain issues. The emotions expressed through such stories connected users to each other. This finding further supports the idea of ‘affective publics’ by Papacharissi (2015), which highlights the power of emotional expression to create emotional bonds and connections.

The issue of the Egyptian attack did not only generate comments of solidarity but also produced comments that were sarcastic and humorous. For instance, some users made comments on how history tends to repeat itself when it comes to a revolution or a social movement:

“Can someone remind me in which section are we now in the book of the French revolution? I think it is the Reign of Terror, isn’t it? 😊” (LI41/15)

The French revolution and also the Iraq invasion were the most common examples pointed to by users. This could show how the narrative of the past continued to define and shape present narratives, although it described a different conflict.

While some users engaged with the Egyptian attack in a sarcastic or humorous way, others expressed more anger and discontent. For example:

“After Gaddafi, this is not a country anymore!! What the hell is this?” (LI366/15)

*“All are attacking Libya’s sovereignty! I am so p***ed off!” (LI375/15)*

These different forms of emotional responses could demonstrate how politics was debated on this platform. The LI Facebook page seemed to serve as a space for emotional ventilation more than a space for analytical and critical comments. Even when users appeared to be unsure about certain issues, their responses often came in the form of prayers, particularly if encountered with conflicting ideas and news:

“Hasbunallahu wa-ni’mal wakeel³⁰” (LI53/14)

*“Laa Hawla Wa Laa Quwwata Il-la Bil-laah³¹. Everything is confusing in this country”
(LI80/15)*

³⁰ Allah (Alone) is Sufficient for us, and He is the Best Disposer of affairs (for us)

³¹ There is no power and no strength except with Allah

The analysis also shows how users increasingly became more cautious about the information they consumed, questioning and doubting its credibility. For example:

“Are you sure it was the sound of a bang? I live close by and it is more likely a bonfire. I could see the light of it. Stop spreading rumours if you are not sure” (LI694/14)

The above comment could reflect two points. On one hand, it shows how misinformation and rumours had the potential to spread easily on Facebook. On the other hand, it reveals how Facebook as a social media platform has made it possible for publics to counter false information, allowing users to question, correct and even provide their own version of truth about the given incidents or events.

However, although questioning and doubting the credibility of information is a healthy practice, users’ judgment in some cases appeared to be irrational and biased. For example, in 2012, one user commented on the credibility of the images and videos of protests back to the early days of the uprising in Benghazi:

“Look, many photos posted online during the 2011 uprising were fake. They related back to the 2006 protests³². They were simply re-used in 2011 to deceive people! It was just a conspiracy” (LI428/12)

What seemed to be irrational about this comment is that technology was not as advanced in 2006 as it has become today. The first iPhone, for example, was introduced in June 2007, suggesting that using smartphones to document and record events occurring in 2006 in Libya is unlikely to have happened. Putting forward such an argument, therefore, could be a result of the user’s intensity of feeling because the time in which this comment was posted coincided with the first anniversary of the uprising, thus perhaps leading them to risk misjudging the surrounding events. Alternatively the user may have just intended to portray it this way to influence readers’ thoughts and thus gain more support for his/her cause.

7.3 Chapter overview

This chapter comprised an empirical study undertaken in order to examine posts and comments that users made on two selected public Facebook pages: the LW Facebook page, a pro-revolutionary page; and the LI Facebook page, anti-revolutionary, with the aim of

³² Protests took place in Benghazi outside the Italian consulate on 17 Feb 2006, after a Danish newspaper depicted the Prophet Mohammed in a controversial caricature. The government struck back at these protests and at least ten people were reported to be killed.

better understanding the nature of the emergent networked public sphere and its evolution over time. The analysis revealed key interesting findings that are presented below:

The first important finding in the data was the change in the number of extracted Facebook messages over several years, before both pages witnessed unforeseen developments. While the LW Facebook page entirely disappeared, the LI Facebook page faced a dramatic decline in its activities and became an inactive page. On one hand, this finding shed light on the dynamic and fluid nature of Facebook, which allows for easy creation and deletion of groups and pages. On the other hand, these unforeseen developments, particularly on the LI Facebook page, help us to understand the practices of networked publics, demonstrating the shifting nature of public focus over time.

The second important finding in the data was the nature of discussions carried out on the two selected Facebook pages. On both pages, the discussion appeared to be more emotional and assertive than cognitive and analytical. For example, the LW Facebook page was widely used to rejoice over the fall of the regime rather than sharing information or debating politics on the first two anniversaries. The most prevalent categories at this time were those expressing *Solidarity* and *Optimism*. Over time, this changed. The discussion became more negative on the later anniversaries, demonstrating an overarching sense of disillusion and despair at the apparent major defeat of the revolution. *Criticism*, *Anger*, and *Sadness* were the most dominant categories at this later stage. Conversely, the analysis of the LI Facebook page content reveals a different pattern. The page maintained the same style of discussion on each anniversary, which was characterised mainly by a heavy amount of criticism of the revolution, written in an aggressive tone and filled with extreme anger.

The third important finding in the data was in relation to the polarised atmosphere reflected in both pages. The study also revealed different patterns in terms of the representation of viewpoints within each Facebook page. For example, while the discussion on the LI Facebook page remained highly on-topic throughout the 3-day period over each anniversary, constituting a continuous line of thinking against the revolution, the discussion on the LW Facebook page witnessed a dramatic change on the later anniversaries. Despite its hostile environment, its content skewed towards a greater diversity of ideological perspectives, even bringing in opposing camps. Although the revolutionaries appeared to be divided among themselves, their discussion represented different stances and opinions.

In addition, the viewpoint of the old regime supporters was increasingly presented within the discussion at this later stage.

Overall, these findings highlight the shifting and changing nature of publics over time and circumstances. Rather than being static, their ideas, discussions and emotions dramatically changed.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only”

Charles Dickens

These words, from the introductory paragraph of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, were written in 1859, to reflect on the contradictions that emerged during the turmoil of the French Revolution and its aftermath. Although the novel was written over 150 years ago, in a predigital age, these dichotomies resonate perfectly within the Libyan context, encapsulating what is going on right now rather well. It provides a basic summary of Libya’s public sphere today, reflecting on how the revolution began in a sheer sense of hope, but devolved into desolation, division and chaos.

By exploring the tale of Libya over three complex phases, before, during and after the uprising, this study sought to find whether these dichotomies and various paradoxical themes are inevitable, or whether the networked public sphere creates an alternative space that to some extent can better support debate and deliberation. The aim was to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital technologies and society interacted over these three phases, and how these technologies were experienced and used during this time. This study goes beyond the false two positions of understanding the democratic potential of internet and social media: ‘optimism’ versus ‘pessimism’; or a tool of ‘liberation’ versus a tool of ‘repression’. Rather, it attempts to understand social media technologies’ complex impact, and even sometimes its contradictory effects on social change and democratic transformation.

This chapter is organised into two main sections: the first section focuses on the two phases, before and during the uprising, to explore and discuss how a small number of digitally savvy young people revolted in a repressed environment, and how they scaled up from Facebook online calls/posts to a bloody revolution. The second section focuses on the post-

revolutionary period, to explore the opportunities of internet and social media for democracy and promoting a nascent public sphere in the country. Before presenting these sections, a summary of the key findings and insights is provided.

8.2 Key findings and insights

This section summarises the key findings and insights related to technology usage and young people's lived experiences before, during and after the uprising. The findings that relate to the (pre-and during the uprising time) only emerged from thematic analysis of the interviews due to the fact that it was not possible to collect actual Facebook data associated with the events of 2011, while the findings relate to the post-uprising period emerged from both the thematic analysis of interview data and the Facebook content analysis. It is also important to mention that the study distinguishes between two phases of the post-uprising period: the first phase covers the period between the subsequent fall of the regime and the beginning of 2014, mainly characterized by excitement and hope towards the democratic transition; the second phase covers the period between 2014 and 2016, mainly marked by disillusionment and instability due to the country's deepening power struggle. Findings as follows:

Pre-uprising

- The Libyan public sphere was found to be largely strangled due to the government's tight control and extensive surveillance. While the study identified a few attempts of self-expression and political blogging, these attempts were not truly open and democratic, but often kept private or indirect, in the name of personal security and safety. The government's political climate encouraged self-censorship in online as well as offline environment.

During the uprising

- Although social media activities came from a tiny fraction of digitally equipped young people, they were able to create innovative ways to bypass the government's internet censorship and keep the information flow free. Through establishing media centres and installing internet satellites, they were able to circumvent restrictions and disseminate revolutionary information. Locals and those who came back from exile collaborated with each other to publicise the revolutionary cause.

- Despite the government's pervasive surveillance, new media in the form of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, along with traditional media played critical roles in disseminating information, and conveying compelling sentiments, within and across national boundaries.
- While various media tools were used to bring the ground experience of the revolutionaries to global attention, the regime itself also made intense efforts to counter the revolutionary narrative using a mix of old and new media approaches. The study revealed how TV talk shows were dedicated to portraying the revolution as a conspiracy against Libya, framing NATO interference as an imperialist attack, while warning about consequences of the revolution such as turning the country into a base for Al-Qaeda and religious extremism.
- Both sides of the conflict contributed to the news stream by distributing highly charged content for their political ends. This resulted in producing intense informational environment that infused with diverse and pluralistic expression, in a way that created an emotional pressure on people, that lead them to rise up either against or for the regime.

Post-uprising (the immediate phase)

- Young participants, particularly those with a revolutionary stance, demonstrated active use of social media platforms; some of which were politically engaged or self-expressed for the first time in their lives, after decades of political apathy and oppression under the previous regime.
- Yet, despite seemingly active political participation, freedom of expression was not totally enjoyed. The study revealed that the ability to discuss public issues which countered the revolutionary stream seemed to be problematic, even among the victorious revolutionaries, resulting in serious threats online and offline.
- While fear of speech deterred many of pro-regime interviewees from voicing their views online, the Facebook analysis revealed extraordinary amount of criticism posted against the revolution. This suggests that there were groups of pro-regime users who were able to voice their opinion and views, although it is important to

acknowledge that there was no absolute confirmation of the users' locations and identities (e.g. whether they were inside or outside Libya, and whether they were posting under pseudonyms or real identities).

Post-uprising (the later phase)

- Growing distrust in media sources. While young Libyans are facing a fundamental challenge: assessing the credibility of information disseminated online, they are simultaneously developing strategies and approaches to verify and fact-check news both as consumers and distributors.
- Young Libyans face new forms of control exerted by militias, armed factions, tribes and family in a way have pushed many to censor themselves, (e.g. edit privacy setting, switch between platforms and withdraw from politics).
- With media sector (old and new) linked to political, regional and ideological agendas, engagement in support of democratic values is not a priority for many Libyans. Stability was prioritised over democracy, in the sense that most participants wanted to turn the clock back to 2010 before the revolution.
- The political, ideological and regional polarisation that is raging in Libya is reflected in the online media landscape. Although it widens diversity of views, invigorating plurality in the public space, this polarisation is fuelling trends towards political resignation and disengagement.
- Paralleling the decrease in political involvement, there is an increased tendency towards transforming social media networks, chiefly Facebook, to commercial spaces, particularly as a field for advertising and entertainment.
- Although social media platforms can serve as archives of memory records or action repertoires that might be passed on to other users, a part of a rich and feverish period of digital history of Libya has slipped away due to the fluidity structure and unforeseen developments of Facebook (e.g. the disappearance of the LW Facebook page).

8.3 Digital media and new publics: revolting in a repressed environment

Since the breakout of the Arab uprisings, much has been written about the role of social media as a force for change and reform in Tunisia and Egypt (e.g. Howard & Hussain, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Fuchs, 2012; Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014). Yet, far too little attention has been paid to the Libyan uprising. Therefore, this study is devoted to discussing the Libyan context, focusing on young people's uses and experiences of social media, mainly during the uprising and the post-uprising period (2011-2016). However, it was also important to briefly shed light on the political use of the internet and social media during the time leading up to the Libyan uprising, in order to better understand the nature of the emergent networked public sphere and whether it contributed in some way to facilitating political change.

Before the eruption of the Arab Spring, Libya stood in a much worse position in terms of using the internet for free expression and political activism, compared to the situation in the neighbouring countries Tunisia and Egypt. While Tunisian and Egyptian bloggers and activists made use of the internet to challenge the state-regulated boundaries of the public sphere, debating politics, criticising their regimes and in some cases organising political actions (although it did not result in massive scale activism that put a real pressure on the then current governments) (Howard, 2010; Randeree, 2011), the use of internet and social media in political activism was far different and much more restricted in Libya. The study clarifies how the culture of fear, which found to be either cultivated by family or imposed by the government, was ingrained in young people's everyday routine. Because of this, self-censorship emerged as commonplace among the study participants, resulting in narrow self-expression and perhaps leading to apathetic political attitude. In fact, the association between political apathy and the fear of government retaliation, according to Iskandar (2006), are expected consequences within repressive regimes. Thus, the question is: How could Libyan young people break the fear barrier and trigger the revolution in 2011? And how they did scale up from Facebook online calls/posts to a bloody revolution?

From an optimistic perspective, the internet and social media enable publics to communicate faster and easier, gain greater access to information, get more opportunities to engage in the public sphere, and enhance their ability to undertake collective action (Shirky, 2011; Lynch, 2011). Internet and social media also have the potential to expand people's political knowledge and thus increase the likelihood of their political interest which may in turn lead to an increase in political activism (Debatim, 2008; Howard, 2010).

In this study, although online expression in the Libyan public sphere was found to be largely strangled due to the government's tight control, there have been tiny attempts of blogging before the revolution, some of which emerged under the government's recognition and surveillance. There have also been attempts to seek political information outside the regime's realm, mainly from opposition websites, of which a number were freely accessible during the time leading up to the uprising.

Despite the fact that political blogging remained a very small phenomenon among those who reflected a strong sense of human agency and will, their attempts at blogging as a means of self-expression may indicate a beginning of change in youth participation in political life in Libya, and may have in some way contributed to pave the way towards political change. In the absence of democratic governance, internet technology seemed to allow young people, who desired to have a voice, to reorient themselves from passive participants to potential subjects. It enabled and empowered their efforts to cross the boundary in the offline world, and moved forward to counter in some way the hegemonic political culture, challenging different governmental and social restrictions (Lotan et al., 2011).

In a restricted environment, engaging in online activities to express personal opinion or even to observe passively political information can be considered as a brave act. Such acts could be a possible basis for influencing a new generation to embrace a set of new political norms and values, which over time could be a part of making social change possible. As described in earlier chapters, all participants in this study who were exposed to political information provided by the opposition websites or engaged in blogging were more likely to participate at some point during the 2011 uprising, either online (e.g. posting, sharing) or offline (joining protests). This could suggest that political discussion occurring in these online spaces may have educated those participants, raised their awareness and promoted their political knowledge towards certain issues, enabling them to obtain different types of political information that fell outside the regime realm, and thus perhaps forming a counter-public sphere (Fraser, 1990). According to Lynch (2007, p.5), "[if] blogs cannot constitute a genuine public sphere without reaching a mass audience, they still might form a counter-public, an incubator of new ideas and new identities which evolves alongside and slowly reshapes the mainstream public from below". Yet, without being over-optimistic, one cannot ignore the fact that the statistics reflect a very low internet penetration rate in Libya (only 5.5% in 2010) (Salem & Mourtada, 2011), and in general young people's engagement

was rarely and narrowly political. Thus, it would be very difficult to argue that the internet played a crucial role in enhancing or creating a public sphere at this point in the pre-uprising period, but it may perhaps have contributed to planting possible seeds that were vital for the formation of consciousness and opinion, making small groups of young people ready to take up possible action.

8.3.1 Breaking the fear barrier, motivations and drivers

This study does not aim to claim that social media on its own created the revolution, but to explore to what degree and in what ways these technologies aided the Libyan protests, and understand its significance in how events played out. Following the path of the neighbouring countries Tunisia and Egypt, some young Libyans were inspired and motivated to break the fear barrier and topple the regime. Castells (2012), in *'Networks of Outrage and Hope'* highlights the connections between social media networks as a means of protest and the overcoming of fear. He shows how enthusiasm is linked to hope and fear, and goal-seeking action is linked to anxiety and anger, leading to the creation of emotional movements. The current study emphasises this point. The hope for change and the feeling of anger led some participants to overcome their fears to act against the regime, either online or offline, while simultaneously leading others to engage in a state of sustained passivity owing to their fear of government. Even before the Libyan protests sparked, the enthusiasm about the possibility of revolting against the regime started to shade the picture. Although the interviewees did not see to engage or network actively with the calls for protests on social media, some identified acts in this study could be seen as important indicators of the underlying motivation leading up to protesting against the regime.

Just before the Libyan uprising occurred, social media seemed to invite pluralized political expression and narrative, in which a variety of actors had a say and contributed to the stream (Papacharissi, 2015). Some of these actors were able to create content in a decentralized manner, crossing national borders and potentially contributing to the mobilization process. Participants reported that social media seemed to become a space of interactions between Libyans and non-Libyans from the neighbouring countries, Tunisia and Egypt. It was reported that some Tunisian citizens made provocative comments on Facebook, emasculating and humiliating young Libyans, accusing them of lacking capability to protest against the regime, in a way that may have led to fuelling some young people's anger and actions, and the way they challenged their fears. Questioning Libyan 'masculinity' in the eyes of other Arab nations suggests how the effects of emotionally- charged content may

have added to the intensity of the atmosphere at that point in time, and perhaps paving the way for protests to spark.

As such, it can be argued that social media networks may have provided the conditions for connective environment, offering an online arena for interaction and discussion, where the logic of action seemed to be altered from traditional collective to connective (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). In this type of horizontal networking logic, which is characterised by personalized content, diverse and pluralistic expression, individuals can join protests without having to be a part of a hierarchical political organization or to buy into an ideological perspective. The horizontal networks of communication could facilitate the spread of mobilising content in the new media spaces, in a way that may lend voice and visibility to underrepresented points of view (Papacharissi, 2015). Thus, it is more likely to broaden the scale of protests, gaining the attention and sympathy of a large portion of people.

When the Libyan protests sparked, sharing highly emotional content was one of the most powerful ways to connect people together, and create emotional bonds (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). Online content of protesters and the regime brutality against them, which later were picked up by traditional media, helped to spread the revolutionary cause. Due to the violent nature of the events, information and news shared from the ground was characterized mainly by bloody scenes, deadly clashes and rumours, leading to an increase in drama and interest. Especially in the early days of conflict, there was widespread propaganda about the regime, such as the allegation of rape, and the widespread notion that the regime employed black Africans to serve as mercenaries. Such content was found to have an impact on triggering people's anger, intensifying their feelings and becoming an emotional rallying point during the protests. This draws our attention to the ability of social media platforms to pluralize expression that present a 'polyphonic yet coherent narrative' (Papacharissi, 2015) against the Al-Gadaafi regime and for revolution and democracy.

However, the regime, on the other hand, made strong efforts to counter the revolutionary coherent narrative and put the revolution down using different media channels. Intimidation of the spectre of Islamic extremism, tribal civil war and framing NATO interference as an imperialist attack, was a major part of the regime propaganda effort. Videos and images of war crimes claimed to be committed by the rebels were also broadcast.

This content shared on different types of media, which served different political ends, seemed to create an emotional pressure on people which might have been difficult to withstand; thus, they rose up either against or for the regime. This, therefore, suggests that the political information environment in the Libyan uprising by no means constituted an ideal public sphere in the Habermasian sense, but at the same time it cannot be considered irrelevant to it. The emotional dimension of political expression is a viable aspect of political participation and a crucial element for opinion formation and mobilization.

8.3.2 Surveillance and censorship

Social media tools have the potential to become tools of counter power instead of only tools of social connection and entertainment. However, the effects of government surveillance and censorship are likely to make the process of counter power and social change harder not easier, increasing the risks of political participation. Morozov (2011) argued that social media can have negative implications on social movements because social media can be used by authoritarian regimes as tools of oppression and propaganda to counter popular uprisings. From his perspective, the internet can empower the strong and disempower the weak. These arguments are important to this research because the old regime sought to control the flow of information in the public sphere throughout its rule.

As the study shows, despite the efforts of reforms and openness within the regime system in the pre-uprising period, young people never reached the level of direct criticism of the regime. Further, although many opposition websites were left unblocked, the regime simultaneously used internet-monitoring services to observe users' online activities and keep them under the government's eye. This suggests that freedom of speech was defined within vague parameters of the regime's interest prior to the uprising. During the 2011 events, the internet and social media were also targeted for censorship by the regime because of their use in disseminating revolutionary information. In fact, the internet was shut down most of the time during the uprising. In addition, the findings show that government internet surveillance went beyond merely blocking the internet, to crack down on bloggers and activists who could potentially have had an influence on driving the movement forward.

Although public sphere activities came from a tiny fraction of digitally equipped young people, governmental actions to control the flow of the information could be seen as significant predictors of how important the internet and social media were to the

revolutionaries to threaten the regime's status quo. Their importance as a means for transmitting information and self-expression could also be inferred through the words of the BBC World News editor, Jon Williams, when he commented on the internet being cut off by the regime (Williams, 2011). He said that reporters and journalists had additional responsibility due to the decrease of the flow of video and images produced by networked local citizens in the early days due to the internet cut-off.

However, despite the internet interruption, the flow of information did not completely stop. While there were no special services such as "speak to tweet" which was introduced during the Egyptian revolution by big companies such as Google and Twitter (Kassem, 2013), this study demonstrates how young Libyans constantly created innovative ways to bypass the government's internet censorship in order to keep the information flow free. Through establishing media centres, installing internet satellites or using existing ones that were already available in some workplaces (e.g. companies), small groups of young people teamed up with their peers to seek, record and disseminate revolutionary information. This was despite the government's rigorous efforts to track the location of internet satellite users, particularly in Tripoli (through the regime's Electronic Army team). In the opposition-controlled areas (e.g. Benghazi), the regime lost all its capability to monitor citizens' online activities due to the separation of the internet network from the main national telecommunication services, leaving many networks outside of its surveillance.

This could explain why images and videos of the events continued to flow. These findings may help us to understand the power of social media in facilitating the fast exchange of information, thereby contributing to the momentum of the events, and keeping alive a spirit of resistance, particularly when connected to traditional media, allowing for wider dissemination. Therefore, it could be argued that it would be always very difficult for repressive regimes to entirely apply precise censorship over their citizens. Circumvention technologies can certainly help to break through information blockades and counter barriers that may be built by governments to block the flow of information. Consequently, the state's ability to dominate the public sphere might be fundamentally challenged and weakened. This does not ignore, however, the fact that digital activism will always involve putting individuals at risk.

Although the tide of advanced technology can make tech-savvy groups of young people hard to detect, at the same time it does not entirely guarantee their safety. As the study

shows, the possibility of being identified by the government led some participants to refrain from expressing their views and to engage in self-silencing, particularly when the uprising took a serious and violent direction. Conversely, it led others to challenge their fears and continue to oppose the regime. This can suggest that government surveillance and censorship may be seen as drivers as well as barriers. While it may lead some to confront their regime and possibly help to take the movement forward, it could also lead others to avoid engaging in risky online behaviour, and thus, might limit low-cost online platforms' revolutionary potential.

8.3.3 The relationship between mainstream and new social media

The thesis that the Arab Spring revolutions were simply “Facebook revolutions” or “Twitter revolutions”, referring to the role of social media in ousting the long-standing Arab regimes, was largely rejected by many scholars (e.g. Morozov, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013). However, this does not mean that social media had no role in the Arab Spring. According to Tufekci & Wilson, (2012) social media was one part of the emergence of a new system of political communication that shaped the events of the Arab Spring. They argued that this system, which is a combination of three elements, satellite TV channels, Internet and social media platforms and the Internet-enabled cellphones, created a fundamental transformation in the Arab public sphere during the MENA uprisings. This was because it expanded citizens' capability to document events and increased the odds of their political participation.

However, as the focus of Tufekci and Wilson's empirical study was upon Egypt, this raises the question of whether this new system of political communication is operated differently and has similar implications on the events as they unfolded in the Libyan context. Unlike Egypt, internet-enabled cellphones were not prevalent in Libya, although mobile phone penetration reached 161 percent in 2011 (Freedom House, 2015). In addition, the Libyan uprising was characterized by long periods of interruption of different sources of information, both traditional and digital (e.g. blocking internet, disrupting mobile phone services and jamming satellite TV channels). In theory, this means that the relationship between the three main components that constitute the new system of political communication is likely to be missing in the Libyan case. In practice, evidence emerged from the study that challenged this preconception and confirmed that such connections are likely to exist, albeit taking on slightly different dynamics.

Because of the lack of internet-enabled cellphones, the ability of citizens to document events and then share them online was not straightforward. The study shows how getting information out to the world was a difficult task, costing participants much time and effort. It also increased the risks to their personal safety. Despite that, the study reveals how some participants were likely to engage in collaborative acts with their peers to produce and disseminate information. One interesting finding is that some participants with internet access became connecting points, enabling video, photos and news to be collected through their non-internet networks of trusted family and friends. This meant that even individuals with no internet access were able to contribute to the process of disseminating revolutionary information. Mobile phone devices, therefore, do not necessarily have to be internet-enabled to be a part of the new system of political communication. Only a few points of internet connection might be needed to enable political information and voices to spread effectively.

However, spreading information and solidarity messages on a large scale might have remained limited if not connected with traditional media. Consistent with the literature (e.g. Castells, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013), this research stressed the importance of traditional media and its relationship with social media. The emerging ‘citizen journalism’ phenomenon is important in light of critical moments, where the environment might be dangerous and not easily accessible for professional journalists. One example among many citizen journalists’ videos picked up by traditional media, specifically the Al-Jazeera TV channel, was a video showing a group of young people raising a huge rebel flag in Tripoli during the uprising. The video also showed police removing it. The study participants who recalled this video had no internet access at that time and watched it on the Al-Jazeera TV channel. Being able to record such a video in a highly restricted environment, from inside Tripoli, illustrates the biggest impact of social media, when it links to traditional media in covering domestic actions at critical moments, and thus, bringing these moments to public attention when they would have been otherwise kept in the dark.

The importance of traditional media such as Al-Jazeera lay in its ability to increase visibility and presence of the messages of those opposed to the regime, expanding their publicity to reach regional and global publics. This, therefore, may have contributed to the momentum of the events and helped to mobilise sympathisers. Enhanced visibility inside and outside of Libya involved much more effort than only relying on images and videos

produced by citizen journalists. The Al-Jazeera channel as well as many other traditional media outlets maintained presence on the ground through their correspondents, particularly in the areas that quickly came under opposition forces, such as the eastern city of Benghazi and the mountainous region in the very west of Libya. The study shows how the ‘media centres’ established in these areas, in which cameras were sent to front lines to capture videos and images of the clashes, also became very important sources of information for Al-Jazeera as well as other different media outlets. In fact, these centres seemed to become hubs for collaboration between different actors such as locals, journalists, correspondents and the Libyan diaspora (those who were living in the exile and returned back during the uprising) in order to gather more publicity and attention for their cause. Although the regime tried to publicise its cause as well, it seemed to gain less visibility on some media outlets, particularly Al-Jazeera, where pro-regime news, according to study interviewees, was often omitted. Thus, this suggests that the visibility of the revolutionary cause was more likely to outweigh the voice of the regime, leading to a shift in the balance of power from regime to the citizens, and perhaps generating global public sphere.

8.4 Digital media and new publics: new forms of engagement

As discussed previously, the public sphere under the old regime was tightly closed and controlled, resulting in a restricted flow of information and a vast practise of self-censorship both online and offline (Bell, Anthony & Witter, 2011). Following the fall of the regime, however, there has been more ease and availability in accessing the internet and various forms of social media networks. Libya’s internet was switched back on after months of a government-mandated shutdown (Zhang, 2011). Since then, the proportion of Libyans, particularly young people, connected through social media, particularly Facebook, has undergone a continuous increase (Salem & Mourtada, 2011; Freedom House, 2015; Internet World Stats, 2017).

However, although this growth in public access to, and intense use of, social media holds the promise of freeing the flow of information and reviving the public sphere, several aspects of these technologies simultaneously may limit that democratic potential. According to many scholars (e.g. Sunstein, 2002; Papacharissi, 2009; Fuchs, 2010; Iosifidis, 2011; Tufekci, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018), although digital media has the potential to provide greater access to information and enhance democratic deliberation, it may also undermine democracy, segment and polarise populations. Thus, these technologies should not be considered ‘neutral tools’.

One of the major characteristics of this study that must be understood before discussing the potential contribution and limitations of social media to Libya's emergent digital public sphere is that Libya is undergoing a political transition period, wherein Libyan citizens are being shaped as we speak, and the role of social media seems to be developing constantly. Accordingly, the idea of this study does not evolve only around that absolute or rigid argument that internet and social media networks, on their own, are able to 'make or break' a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2009), but it is also about young people and their surrounding uncertain environment. The following sections discuss young Libyans' interaction with digital media, considering their uses, lived experiences, and attitudes to provide a concrete understanding of the networked public sphere and how has it evolved over the last couple of years after the uprising.

8.4.1 Social media, new opportunities and different challenges

As discussed in the findings, the first two years subsequent to the uprising were marked by a vibrant political environment full of hope and enthusiasm to establish a new Libya. Young participants were found to take a more active role than was possible before the fall of the regime. Many of them, particularly those with a revolutionary stance, were involved in online political communication, sharing information and discussing politics. This shows that the new information environment, facilitated by social media, created a more vibrant and participatory space of information that flowed differently from the previously state-controlled media. The traditional centre of one-way communication (government to citizens) was no longer restricting the flow of information, but new gates of freedom of expression and power were opened up.

From a positive perspective, this unprecedented change in social media environment seemed to be promising, suggesting that new democratic possibilities were on the horizon in Libya. However, by digging deep into the participants' experiences in this early stage, a number of limitations and restrictions were identified. The findings show that this environment was not truly democratic and inclusive, and not all public topics were open to discussion and debate, particularly those against the mainstream revolutionary discourse. The interview analysis, for example, shows that the voices of the pro-regime participants were likely to be muted. This was because the majority of pro-regime participants feared the possibility of being harassed or abused if they challenged the revolutionary dominant

debate, particularly at this critical time, just after the uprising. Therefore, they chose mostly to remain silent online as well as offline.

This could be better explained through the ‘spiral of silence’ theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) in which minority viewpoints are intimidated into silence because they are inconsistent with the view of the majority or the mainstream discourse. According to this theory, the spiral of silence occurs when individuals perceive their opinion as unpopular. Therefore, they remain quiet for fear of exclusion and criticism. This also could explain why the anti-revolutionary viewpoint was rarely represented on the LW Facebook page, particularly in the first two years following the uprising. It could be that the pro-regime users might have perceived this page, which introduced itself as a pro-revolutionary page and was populated by a majority of revolution enthusiasts, as an unsafe and unfriendly environment for showing their opposition to the revolution. For this reason, therefore, it might have been avoided.

However, this does not mean that all online platforms were totally avoided. The LI Facebook page could be a good example to show that there was a group of anti-revolutionary individuals who might have been inclined to form or join online groups of like-minded individuals to express themselves. Forming such a page perhaps gave them a feeling that they were in a majority so that they could interact in a safe and friendly environment. On this page, the criticism of the revolution and its chaotic aspects was explicit and stark. Although it is impossible to verify the users’ locations and their identities (whether they were anonymised or real), the extraordinary amount of criticism against the revolution suggests that social media sites may have enabled certain groups to break their silence and challenge the dominant revolutionary debate even from behind a keyboard. Hence, it could be argued that social media contributed to widening the margin of freedom of expression, and perhaps helped to create alternative publics or “subaltern counterpublics” that compete to articulate their voice within the public sphere (Fraser, 1990). Although it is important to acknowledge that the arguments produced might not have been equally powerful, as the pro-regime groups were in a weaker position and were not supported by the mainstream media, the fact of an argument being less privileged does not necessarily mean it has less impact on the development of the public discourse. According to many scholars (Lynch, 2007; Papacharissi, 2009), the multiple public spheres, which vary in power and extent, exist to give a voice to collective identities and

allow different ideas to develop, leading eventually to reshaping public opinion and views, particularly in the long run.

8.5 Digital dilemma, new dynamics and disposition

Since 2014, the divisive trend has become clear and sharp in Libya due to a violent power struggle. As a result, the emergent vibrant political environment has fallen apart and the conflictual atmosphere is reflected by Libya's transitional path that evolved after the 'Feb 17 revolution'. Although digital networks helped to foster a space of relative freedom in which information and ideas could travel with relative ease and speed, Libya's fast-changing events brought about new challenges that altered the online environment and introduced new dynamics. These challenges evolved around the complexity of the networked public sphere, including lack of objectivity in the information flow, widespread polarisation and tension, the fragility and the fluidity of social media content, and how people come to understand this medium and evaluate their experience. The following sections discuss how this complex digital world affected young people's use of social media, including their experiences and attitudes, especially at this phase of the escalated uncertainty in Libya's situation.

8.5.1 Changing levels of trust in social media information

Looking backward into past years, participants, particularly those with a revolutionary stance, felt that they were emotionally exploited and misled by information circulated on both old and new media. Al-Jazeera TV in particular, whose coverage was mostly informed by user-generated content, was accused of spreading misinformation/disinformation and obliterating facts to promote the revolutionary viewpoint. Although this may be very much true, it does not mean that the pro-regime media provided unbiased coverage, or that the anti-revolutionary participants were not emotionally influenced.

In media convention, the old mantra '*If it bleeds, it leads*' is often followed by media outlets to grab people's attention and minds. Add to that the Libyan uprising itself was of a violent nature. As discussed earlier in section 8.3.1, the propaganda machine for both sides of the conflict, pro- and anti-revolution, was on, competing for attention to seek public support for their cause. TV presenters, bloggers and activists seemed to become new opinion leaders for publics, trying to direct and manipulate their opinion. This suggests that members of the public can be vulnerable targets for opinion manipulation and propaganda campaigns, particularly in this digital age where information is everywhere.

A more recent example showing how digital media can be used as a tool of manipulation and persuasion by targeting political content at specific audiences is the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, where data was harvested from up to 87 million Facebook users to be used for the U.S. presidential campaign of Donald Trump. In a series of undercover videos by Channel 4 News (2018), a Cambridge Analytica Executive was caught discussing election tricks and techniques on how the company gives facts emotional coloration and deliberately preys on people's fears:

*“The two fundamental human drivers when it comes to taking information on board effectively are hopes and fears, and many of those are unspoken and even unconscious -- you didn't know that was a fear until you saw something that just evoked that reaction from you”. He continued, “and our job is to get, is to drop the bucket further down the well than anybody else to understand what are those really deep-seated underlying fears, concerns. There is no good fighting an election campaign on the facts because actually **it's all about emotion**”*

This quote above shows how the way information is shared can be manipulated by gathering data on users, so that they can be targeted with certain posts and ads that may impact their potential voting behaviour as well as their feelings. This confirms Gramsci's argument that the pure spontaneity of an action or event does not exist (Gramsci, 1971), but there are often certain players and organisers, with varying degrees of power, involved in setting a scene, and paving the way for certain events to unfold. Therefore, people must learn how to be attentive, and must develop new approaches to weigh up the claims themselves because “it can be hard to see beyond their own worlds if they are not looking” (boyd, 2010, p. 34).

In this study, the emerging findings from both the interviews and the Facebook data show that young people are increasingly developing a cautious and critical approach in dealing with social media information. To a great extent, this is a very healthy practice because it indicates that people started eradicating their media illiteracy and engaging critically with public discourse and discussion. However, things cannot be reduced to the simple improvement of people's critical thinking, since the networked public sphere itself is problematic. We are now living in an environment where information and documentation is everywhere. People are more susceptible to fake news and echo chambers online than ever before. Therefore, being attentive or critical does not necessarily offer a magical solution to the problem of getting reliable information. The process of distinguishing between what is real and what is false is difficult and complex. Because the traditional

gatekeepers are no longer controlling the distribution of information, unverified information and false stories can spread easily on social media networks. This would complicate the situation further and create chaos, particularly within a setting that is already chaotic and complex such as Libya today, where people encounter challenges to the trustworthiness of content on almost every story, post or image, leaving them in doubt and confusion.

In such a complex environment, Tufekci (2017) argued that people often become highly sceptical of social media information. Thus, they tend to seek information they agree with and that matches their views. Such a tendency, however, could have negative implications on the development of the public sphere because it could potentially lead to polarization and an echo chamber effect rather than creating the opportunity to form healthy public debate. The following section is devoted to discussing the positive and negative sides of being sceptical and doubtful in further detail.

8.5.2 From the hope of democratizing to polarizing?

On a positive note, scepticism in such a chaotic information environment can be understood as a healthy response because it led many participants either pro-or anti revolution to seek and verify information from various sources, even opposite to their views. These attempts to get reliable information, even from competing sources, is very important to the development of the public sphere because it can lead to diversify people's networks, and thus, expose them to ideas and views different from their own. It also might extend their engagement and encourage them to establish a conversation with others to discuss certain issues, which eventually could contribute to fostering public debate.

Yet, there is also a downside of scepticism which is consistent with Tufekci's argument mentioned above regarding fostering polarization. Although scepticism led many participants to use additional sources to check the validity of information, it simultaneously led others to customize their social media feeds in their attempts to avoid confusion and misinformation, limiting their digital space of interaction to certain like-minded individuals and trusted networks. This filtering effect, on one hand, could reduce the opportunity of being exposed to new information and various ideas. On the other hand, it could restrict people's content from reaching wider publics. As a result, they might end up being isolated in an environment within the boundaries of their community narratives, creating what is

called an “online echo chamber” that often leads to reinforce people’s own views and biases.

A good example of the echo chamber effect could be reflected in the findings that emerged from the content analysis of the anti-revolutionary LI Facebook page. The analysis shows that the nature of the content was mainly like-minded, providing a very coherent anti-revolutionary narrative rarely interrupted by the opposite side of the argument. If we assume that the page’s users were mainly interacting with like-minded social media content and individuals, the possibility of building upon and confirming their pre-existing beliefs would be high. Therefore, it would have been difficult for them to break out of these echo chambers. According to Tufekci (2017), this could lead to construction of radical opinions and views in a way that leads people to go on to carry out vicious battles online, which result in more polarization while simultaneously deepening the filter bubble.

These vicious battles and radical opinion characterised much of the content of the pro-revolutionary LW Facebook page. The content analysis shows how the page, particularly in late anniversaries, degenerated into a space littered with acrimonious interchanges such as insults, name-calling and aggressive criticism. The interactions that occurred on this page clearly reflect the country’s deep internal conflict in terms of ideological, tribal, and regional division. However, despite its fragmentary and fractured atmosphere, this page emerged as an environment of participatory free and diverse expression. The range of topics, reactions and feelings expressed on this online space reflected multiple and overlapping publics, addressing myriad cultural and political issues. Despite being focused on one single narrative as showed in the early stage of the revolution, the page was highly representative of many points of view in this later stage, and was even inclusive of those in favour of the old regime. This, therefore, might better fit within Fraser’s description of participatory democracies in which various publics are competing to articulate their voices and views within the public sphere (Fraser, 1990).

Based on the above discussion, the public sphere, therefore, is not a space of homogeneous groups, nor a space of only rational-critical thinking, nor a source of consensus. Rather, it must be understood as a space composed of heterogeneous groups and ‘multiple publics’(Antony & Thomas, 2010) whose thoughts and feelings are deeply intertwined and overlapped (Papacharissi, 2015). The goal of the public sphere according to Mouffe (2005) is to acknowledge and appreciate differences, and turn ‘antagonism into agonism’. By

enabling expressions of dissent and voicing disagreement within the same online space, the chances to make a fuller argument, and chances to force other users who are reading to reflect and engage in the discussion, can be enhanced. Thus, understanding and tolerating the opposed viewpoints is possible, so ‘agonism’ could be a result.

This is an important issue for future research: to find out whether users of this page have developed a more tolerant behaviour after 2016, or turning from being former enemies into adversaries. However, this seems to be difficult because of the fluid structure of social media platforms that allows for easy creation as well as deletion of online groups or pages. Although these digital platforms can serve as archives of memory records or action repertoires that might be passed on to other users (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), the study found that the LW Facebook page has disappeared from Facebook; thus its content is no longer accessible or reachable. Regardless of the reason behind this disappearance or deactivation, what is striking is that a huge amount of data and information was lost, and it might not be possible for it to be retrieved any longer. Even the internet archive, Wayback Machine, cannot not be useful in this case because it is not possible to archive social media data through it as they are voluminous. This means that a part of a rich and feverish period of digital history has slipped away, and the next generation might not be able to learn about it.

To date, there have been several projects and initiatives to archive online materials that invigorated the Arab Spring revolutions, focusing mostly on Egypt, such as R-shief, A Dictionary of the Revolution, Tahrir Documents, 18 Days in Egypt, U-shahid, UCLA’s HyperCitiesEgypt, Wiki Thawra, the Manshurat and the 858 Archive. However, few have survived (Shamel, 2018). Accordingly, much more effort is needed to collect, curate and archive materials that narrated certain revolutionary and post-revolutionary moments, particularly in this fragile online environment where digital content is vulnerable to loss and destruction.

If technology blows up our digital memories, many things will be forgotten. Thus, the development of the public sphere may be hindered because it is difficult for future generations to find adequate and reliable information to look back on, resulting in a narrow vision of the past and inability to make meaning of many historical events. This indeed is not promising and could lead to more confusion and distraction that may potentially result in more polarized stances to a given event.

Therefore, it is unwise and risky to argue that the internet and social media are democratizing because there are many problems and obstacles that need to be overcome first. The potential role of social media is much more sophisticated and complex than putting forward a single argument to emphasise or refute its democratic potential, particularly in Libya's fast-changing circumstances and its unsettling dynamics.

8.5.3 Resigning from the networked public sphere?

According to Davis (1999) and Tufekci (2017), the increase of polarization and conflictual disagreements of online environment could limit people's participation and lead them to withdraw from politics. In this study, the interview findings supported this claim and found a connection between the polarization of the online environment and the increase in resignation from social media among participants. This resignation was mainly from Facebook because it was perceived by many participants as a chaotic and polarised online space that tended to invite backlash and generate flames between users. Therefore, they sought out alternative online platforms that they considered more convenient and friendly for political discussion. Twitter was the most popular platform that many of them switched to.

What is interesting is that the conversation that many participants attempted to avoid was not only with people with "weak ties" but also with people with "strong ties". One participant, for instance, started to refrain from sharing his beliefs and dissenting ideas with his social network of family and close friends on Facebook because of ideological differences that in many cases invited argumentation and friction. To avoid that, he switched to Twitter due to the fact that the platform was less popular among his social circle, so that he could express his own opinion in a less restrictive environment, without having to buy in to an ideology that did not coincide with his views.

Although this reflects flexibility and adaptability of attitude to one's social reality and circumstances, the issue of social relations and bonds could be a real obstacle in tribal societies such as Libya which are characterised by strong social bonds between families and clans, while simultaneously suffering from deep tribal and regional division since the fall of the regime, resulting in complex relationships between society members. This complex social relationship, indeed, can complicate the situation further, and add another layer to the issue of the political participation and free speech.

In war-shattered Libya, political participation and free expression are facing more challenges and constraints. Libya's sad reality of power struggle has resulted in increasing threats and violence particularly against activists and bloggers, bringing about more restrictions to the online world. In past years, for example, more than six bloggers and activists were reported to be killed, while others were forced to flee the country (Freedom House, 2015). In addition, Libya now has three competing governments, none of which are able to actually govern. This haphazard structure and violent environment has of course created fear and confusion as well as distrust in the political process, leading many participants to favour engaging in harmless entertainment activities while increasingly applying self-censorship to avoid unwanted consequences.

This attitude of controlling behaviour and self-censorship could be better explained through the panopticon, a notion designed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham and which has become almost a synonym for surveillance (Galič, Timan, & Koops, 2017). The idea behind the panopticon is that, through certain centralised architectural arrangements, a watchman is allowed to monitor occupants of a specific building such as prisoners, workers and children in order to control or correct their behaviour. The occupants in the building, however, cannot see the watchman, and therefore have to assume that they are constantly under observation, thus they keep self-disciplining. The whole point of the panopticon, therefore, is to control and regulate the subject into certain behaviour by constantly making them aware of the threat of being observed.

Similar to the panopticon mechanism, many participants regulated themselves into certain behaviour, which is in this study the act of self-censorship. This might have happened because participants may have felt they were being watched and monitored. Fear of others and uncertainty seemed to demotivate many of participants from practicing politics, shifting them from potential contributors into passive recipients and spectators. However, what is different here is that surveillance did not seem to follow the traditional panopticon style of watching from one direction. In Libya today, it is not a straightforward situation where a watchman monitors occupants or a government watches its citizens. It is difficult to determine who is watching whom because the command structure is still uncertain in the country owing to the internal conflict that has been fed by external regional and international interference. It is even difficult to draw a line between the state and militias. The act of watching, therefore, is likely to be done by different actors who might want to

stay in power or achieve certain ends. These potential watchers could be the rival governments, armed militias, individuals, families, clans, tribes, or a mix of all.

What complicates things further is that we are here talking about panopticon in the digital environment, which is often invisible and no longer based on the idea of one watching many. Instead, it follows the logic that many are watching many (Galič et al., 2017). According to Castells (2009) the public's actions are "exposed to the decentralised surveillance of millions of eyes [which makes all of us] potential paparazzi" (p. 413). This logic and the feeling of being exposed to danger seemed to turn off many participants from politics, while leading others to engage in a strict form of self-censorship.

One of the common practices of self-censorship was exploiting the technical affordances of social media to interact in a safer environment, such as using pseudonyms or editing privacy settings to choose who could see certain posts. In a continuous period of violence, this is certainly important because it enables people to speak their opinion and contribute to the online flow of information. However, these technology affordances have also complex consequences. For example, using pseudonyms to stay anonymous might put people at risk. According to Morozov (2011), anonymous communication does not always provide safe shelter for political communication because governments and different powerful actors can also use these technological innovations to identify people and harm them. This of course puts online anonymity as a parameter of safety in question.

In addition, privacy settings can also be problematic. Although using these settings might constitute a safer space for interaction, at the same time it might limit people from disseminating information and views to wider public(s), because they do not take actions outside of their safe realm, but remain restricted within the boundaries of their limited and private networks. Thus, having a real impact on the world could be difficult. This safe style of communication could be considered as "slacktivism", a term used to describe unproductive form of activism that involves a mere act of adding a comment or joining Facebook discussion, which cannot alone bring about significant change (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011).

However, online practices do not have to be necessarily geared towards major political change or on-the-ground action because they are also important spaces for conversation and discourse formation. The expansion of digital spaces to become a host for the different publics lends itself to different levels of realities, modes of expression and ideas. In this

sense, Tufekci (2017) argues that the easy online actions of adding 'like' or 'comment' to advocate a certain cause or ideology, may over time, contribute into developing a level of ideological commitment that is essential for changing culture and transforming the public sphere. This is an important issue for future research: to get more insights into the nature of the emergent networked public sphere in Libya.

As mentioned above, the de-centralised forms of digital media allow for both the act of "watching and being watched" (Galič et al., 2017, p.27), particularly in this age of ubiquitous technology and cell-phone cameras which have increased people's ability to document important moments at crucial times (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Despite the attitude of resignation among many participants, the Facebook analysis shows that many posts were informational in nature, including first-hand information, reports, and announcements, which were not limited to text but often came in visual forms such as images and videos. This suggests that there were groups of people (within the time frame of this study) who were still contributing into the flow of information, documenting events, and providing others with the latest news and updates.

However, without romanticizing and perhaps overstating the extent of availability and ease of access to digital media for either receiving or distributing information, it is important to acknowledge the enormous obstacles to internet connectivity in the country. Despite the massive growth in public access to various forms of information and communications technologies, the ongoing armed conflict has resulted in significant physical destruction to vital infrastructure, causing frequent cuts to electricity and physical damage to telecommunication networks. The damage in the country's telecommunications sector alone was estimated at over \$1 billion in 2015 according to the Freedom House report (Freedom House, 2015). This condition clearly limited internet connectivity, leading to further withdrawal and exclusion; thus the possibility for a more accessible, universal public(s) participation can largely be reduced.

Overall, this section demonstrates a complex and multifaceted process of people's increased political disengagement which is either affected by external factors out of their control such as social, environmental and technical issues, or based on a decision made internally by people themselves on fear, polarization or distrust in the political process.

8.5.4 Different media uses, different participation

Paralleling the decrease in people's involvement in politics, the interview findings show that there was an increased tendency towards transforming social media networks, chiefly Facebook, to commercial spaces, particularly as a field for advertising and entertainment. This shift leads back to Habermas' argument that commercialized media led to the decline of the public sphere. For Habermas, commercial media transformed the public sphere into a space of private interests controlled by powerful political and economic elites rather than citizens. These private interests were prioritised over political public discussions, in a way that affected the quality of information and critical political discussion (1989). Habermas' view was not only in relation to tradition media but also to new media. Habermas doubts the democratising impact of the internet because he saw the medium developing towards a commercial direction, which for him would result in the decline the public sphere (Habermas, 2006). Commercial social media, according to Fuchs (2014) and Vaidhyathan (2018), may fragment us and undermine democracy, and should not be considered 'neutral tools'.

According to the above discussion, the situation seems to be bleak, and social media may not be able to drive the public sphere towards a progressive direction. Commercial social media may give way to consumer advertising, rather than public critical discussion, thus diminishing the quality of political discourse, and excluding citizens from the decision-making process. However, although the increased consumerist culture of social media may have a negative impact on the development of Libya's public sphere, it is important to avoid a rigid and absolute argument because the reality is multifaceted and complex.

In Libya's dynamic and fast-changing environment, new technologies may still have the potential to make a difference and contribute to fostering the public sphere and democratic change. Despite all types of obstacles discussed above (e.g. commercial use, resignation from politics, the destruction of infrastructure, the instability of social media platforms), one cannot ignore that social media were still continuing to serve as the main sources of information for many participants. This means that there were other groups of people still active, contributing to the flow of information, providing others with the latest updates and ideas, and raising the possibility for public discussion to develop. Whether these discussions are powerful enough to create a public sphere and enhance democracy is still far from certain. It is also something not only related to the technology itself, but which is also a matter of human agency and will require this to take a certain matter forward. Thus,

it is difficult to argue that the tale of Libya is a tale of boom or a tale of doom. It is complex, dynamic and unpredictable. It is still unfinished and being shaped as we speak.

8.6 The nature of the emergent Libyan networked public sphere: looking back and looking ahead

This section attempts to summarise the above discussion, and provide an overall understanding of the multiple dynamics and dimensions that define the emergent Libyan networked public sphere. By focusing on the unique case of Libya, this study has largely moved beyond general analyses of the Arab Spring to study a general or specific context. A focus on the Libyan case helped yield insights into rich digital experience of a particular context that has not yet been studied. The aim is to demonstrate how the focus on a context such as Libya contributed and added to that body of theoretical debates about the role of social media in the constitution of digital publics and the public sphere.

The relationship between social media and democracy has been reviewed in the previous chapters by engaging with different classical and contemporary conceptualisations and critiques (Fraser, 1990; Papacharissi, 2015; Tufekci, 2017) of the normative Habermasian public sphere theory (Habermas, 1989). The review framed social media as having a dual function: positive and negative, rather than solely positive (Shirky, 2011) or negative (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011). While the positive aspects highlight the value of social media in the democratic process, the existing work also underlines its democratic limits. The existing theoretical discussion points to the need for rethinking the democratic potential of social media to align with the actual needs of complex and ever-changing societies.

In terms of the theoretical implications of this study:

The first implication is that this study has confirmed previous studies (Papacharissi, 2015; Tufekci, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018) and contributed additional empirical evidence that suggests that the internet and social media do not offer the required conditions to achieve an ideal speech situation as articulated by Habermas (1989). It was revealed that the characterization of the emergent networked public sphere in Libya lacked the ideal set of norms that define the Habermasian public sphere such as singularity, rationality, openness, inclusivity and equality. In the context of Libya, it was evident that social media networks did not often function as a consensual space in which people engaged in dialogue over matters of common interest, nor did it serve as a site of fact-based and rational discussion.

Contrary to the Habermasian notion of rational-critical discourse, emotional expressions constituted an important aspect of political discussion on Libyan social media. This is a similar phenomenon as identified by Papacharissi (2015). However, while “networks of hope and anger” (Castells, 2012) might have mobilised people during the revolution, this study illuminates the difficulty of sustaining these feelings over time and circumstances. It demonstrates that while social media may make it easier to mobilise, this does not mean it is easier to achieve gains or to sustain movements. The study revealed that Libyans’ enthusiasm and hope for change has largely been replaced by frustration, polarisation and confusion in a way that has disempowered people and led many to eventually abandon political participation. The difficulties in distinguishing between what is real and what is false information, fear of free speech and political/institutional distrust also added another layer to the problem. While previous studies (Castells, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015) have identified the emotional dynamics centred on the moment of revolution, this study has illuminated how the emotional content on social media platforms continued to construct political expression in the aftermath of the revolution, while also pointing to hostility and polarisation in the online environment.

The second implication is that this study extends our understanding of the nature of the emergent networked public sphere as a dynamic process, which did not exist in a vacuum free of political, social, ideological and even historical influence. The study shows how Libya’s pre-existing divisions might have exacerbated online polarization. More specifically, it illustrates how Libya’s complex tribal composition, and its pre-existing regional cleavages, mainly the East-West divide, have been revived, and came to characterise the online practices and discussions of publics. The tribal and regional division has become most distinct in Libya post-revolution, mainly since 2014, due to the power struggle that has resulted between two main rival governments (the Tripoli-based government in western Libya and the Tubruk-based government in the east). This internal conflict often manifested itself in online content, demonstrating several areas of tension within the society. The division along tribal and regional lines turned social media networks into spaces of contention and conflict, resulting in increased polarization and division. It could be argued that Western lenses are insufficient to understand what is happening in Libya because the issue of online polarisation in Western studies is often understood in terms of issues of class, gender and race inequalities, rather than the tribal issues evident in this research (Papacharissi, 2009; Antony & Thomas, 2010; Tufekci, 2017). This

demonstrates that to understand online polarisation in particular social contexts, we need to understand the underlying socio-cultural dynamics to identify and explain the dynamics of fragmentation.

The third implication is that this research reflects on the evolution of the networked public sphere over time and circumstances rather than narrowing the investigation only to the 2011 watershed year (Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Papacharissi, 2015). This study contributes to the literature by revealing a complex picture of trends and changes in a digital Libya in relation to three critical phases: before, during and after the uprising. Rather than remaining engaged in the social media activities of the revolutionary moment identified by several scholars (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014), this study revealed the temporariness of this particular form of networked public. The findings demonstrate that the practices of the networked publics were temporary in nature. People adapted their level of participation in social media networks according to their experiences, life events, and circumstances that reflected their identities and views on a range of issues. This means that they changed the topics that they posted about, changed their activities and attitudes, displayed different emotions, and switched between social media platforms, demonstrating a dynamic and shifting nature over time. The study also shows that social media networks themselves are fluid and dynamic. While previous studies emphasised the importance of these technologies in creating contemporary archives and memory records to preserve words and pictures (Castells, 2008; Fahmi, 2009; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci, 2017), the Facebook analysis in this study revealed that the fluid nature of social media, which allows for easy appearance/disappearance of pages, rendered them temporary spaces for discussion and made their content difficult to preserve.

Generally, this study conceptualised the evolution of the networked public sphere in Libya as a continuous, dynamic and on-going process, rather than static. During the three critical phases – before, during and after the uprising – it can be argued that the networked public sphere has shifted dramatically, from private to semi-public to chaotic and polarised (see table 8.1 below). Instead of enjoying the socio-economic benefits of democratization and development, Libya has fallen into chaos and division. Libyan politics are contested between rival regional interests and their disagreements are often resolved by the use of violence. Building a democracy from scratch in an environment emerging from such civil conflict is an extremely challenging task. Since it is hard to reach a level of political

consensus in such a contestatory public sphere (Antony & Thomas, 2010), arguably the fostering of pluralism, inclusion and constant negotiation between divergent perspectives (Chantal Mouffe, 2005) are what is needed in Libya today to promote the development of its democratic order.

Table 8.1 Characteristics of networked publics over time and circumstances

Time	Pre-uprising	2011 uprising	Post-uprising (late 2011-2014)	Post-uprising (2014-2016)
Characteristics of the public sphere	State-controlled/closed/private (i.e. no public sphere in Habermasian sense)	Semi-public/the balance of power shifted between the regime and ordinary people	Vibrant/relatively open compared to the past but revolutionary dominant	Conflictual, contested and polarised public sphere
Forms of publics	Controlled publics/disempowered	Emergent counterpublics	Active/expressive/deliberative publics/enthusiastic	Competing publics/disempowered/frustrated/distrustful
Activities and forms of participation	Mostly non-political (e.g. entertainment, socialising)	Active or/and passive political activities (e.g. documenting protests, sharing information and solidarity comments)	Mainly political/civic (e.g. deliberating politics, documenting events, blogging)	Entertainment/civic/commercial/political (e.g. socialising, advertising, charity work, knowledge exchange)
Social media platforms	Forums/blogs and Facebook	Facebook/forums/Twitter	Facebook/Twitter	Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/ Snapchat (increased switch from Facebook to Twitter)

8.7 Final remarks

The final remarks suggest that to understand the nature of emergent networked publics in post-revolutionary societies, the theoretical framework ought to:

- Be situated in the local socio-cultural context because social media networks operate and impact differently in different contexts and under different

circumstances. For example, the full picture of what happened within the networked publics of post-revolutionary Libya could not be understood without knowledge of the underlying cultural divisions, many of which are different from the Western context. Rather than only applying Western models of social fragmentation, researchers should integrate local cultural variables (e.g. tribal and regional divisions) into their analyses.

- Be longitudinal in some way because countries in transition are often experiencing fast-paced changes in a way that makes it problematic to generalise from a snapshot moment. It is therefore important to gain the necessary distance to illuminate general tendencies and overarching trends, and draw out broader theoretical implications.
- Acknowledge that even though the online discussion may not be entirely open and democratic, as evident in the more aggressive and insulting messages in the Facebook analysis, it does not mean this type of expression is irrelevant to the public sphere. Although it by no means constitutes an ideal public sphere in the Habermasian sense, the emotional expressions were nevertheless a crucial element to understand opinion formation and mobilization, and constitute an important aspect of interaction and political engagement.

To conclude, this study critiques the applicability of Habermas's public sphere theory (Habermas, 1989) as a lens to illuminate the political expressions and digital experiences of fast-changing Libya. Rather than the concept of a singular-rational public, this thesis expands on the idea of competing, complex, and affective publics (Tufekci, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015) to consider the nature of the emergent networked public/public sphere post-Arab Spring. While both Tufekci and Papacharissi centred on the moment of revolution, this study has extended its time frame to include the aftermath of the revolution. It is clearly distinguished from these earlier studies in terms of its focus, sample, timeframe and methodological approach. Overall, this study contributes to the narrative of the Arab Spring uprisings by emphasising that networked publics are dynamic, shifting and constantly changing and developing over time and circumstances. This dynamic nature points to the need for further research to align with the needs of complex and ever-changing societies. The above points set the scene and provide a point of departure for designing future research.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

The main aim of this thesis has been to advance our understanding of the nature of the Libyan networked public sphere, and how it has evolved over the past few years, mainly between 2011-2016, with a brief a glance at its nature in the pre-uprising period. This topic is important because of the many transitions and changes that Libya has been witnessing since the revolution began in February 2011. In this concluding chapter, a summary of the findings is presented through revisiting the research questions. In light of the findings, the contributions to knowledge in relation to theory, methods and practice are discussed, before ending the chapter with recommendations and suggestion for future research.

9.2 Research questions revisited

The current study set out to address the following main research question: what is the nature of the emergent networked public sphere in Libya, and how has it evolved since the revolution?

In order to answer this research question, the following sub-questions were pursued:

Research Question No. 1. To what extent did social media play a role in facilitating political change and creating a space for political discourse in the governmental-controlled public sphere during the Libyan uprising?

Regardless of the early indications which suggest that social media cannot be regarded as a phenomenon of importance in the Libyan uprising, such as the low internet penetration rates (Salem & Mourtada, 2011) and internet and telecommunication services disruption during the uprising (Scott-Railton, 2011), evidence that emerged from the study challenged this preconception and confirmed that social media was vital in driving the uprising. For example, despite the government's vigorous efforts of internet surveillance and censorship, the regime lost its capability to monitor citizens' online activities, particularly in the opposition-controlled areas (e.g. Benghazi). Circumvention technologies helped citizens to break through the information blockades and counter barriers that were used by the government to block the flow of information.

User-generated content was often a source of news and information for the traditional media, which in turn helped to maximize the presence of such content, and bring it to public attention. Otherwise, this content would have not reached an audience, particularly that

posted from the dangerous front lines or the regime-controlled areas, where certain traditional media outlets, such as Al-Jazeera, were banned. What is interesting in this study is that some participants with internet access became connecting points, enabling video, photos and news to be collected through their non-internet networks of trusted family and friends. This meant that even individuals with no internet access were able to contribute to the process of disseminating revolutionary information. Mobile phone devices, therefore, do not necessarily have to be internet-enabled to be a part of the new system of political communication. Only a few points of internet connection can be effective to enable political information and voices to spread widely. Although the internet and social media may not have been credited with playing a key role in organizing and coordinating events during the uprising, their importance lies in their use as a means of publicity to increase the visibility of the rebels' actions and activities. In this sense, the role of digital technology in reporting the events of the Libyan uprising appears to support the idea that the new information environment, created by a mix of traditionally and digitally mediated forms of communications, could fundamentally challenge and create a space in the governmental-controlled public sphere by bringing in new voices.

Research Question No. 2. To what extent has social media facilitated the emergence of a networked public sphere in Libya's post-uprising period: has it helped foster a more democratic environment?

The internet and social media are now reaching a broader-cross section of Libyan society, and is no longer limited to digital pioneers or elite bloggers (Freedom House, 2015). Whether that is good or bad in relation to the development of the democratic process remains uncertain and impalpable. The optimism and hope that seemed to shine on everything in the immediate stage of Libya's post uprising have been tempered over the past few years, particularly since the conflict took a new turn in 2014. The vibrant political environment marked by young participants practising different forms of online activities transformed into a space of caution, disillusionment and uncertainty.

The study shows that the networked public sphere became a mirror or a reflection of what was happening on the ground, accentuating the country's political, social and ideological divisions, rather than creating a better reflection of life underlying it. People seemed simply to take their biases and prejudices online, turning the space into an aggressive and hostile environment, that led many to eventually abandon political participation. Five years after

the uprising, the study highlighted that stability was prioritised over democracy, in the sense that most participants wanted to turn the clock back to 2010 before the revolution.

Therefore, this study avoids exciting narratives about the role of technology in rejuvenating the public sphere because the technological hope and the reality of the Libyan context clash. It is true that the internet and social media heralded a new era of political participation never experienced before in Libya, and there might have been a successful production of discourse at certain times, but the internet cannot be regarded as a new public sphere. The ebb and flow tendencies of digital technology suggest paradoxical and uncertain effects on the development of the democratic process in the country. Digital technology is in the best of times and the worst of times. It is in the best of times because online spaces may be democratising in providing opportunities for many people to access information and comment on events; this turn of events has indeed materialized. But it is also in the worst of times because the same technology seems to push towards commercialization, polarization, political resignation, and create confusion and distraction. The fact that Libya is in the throes of change, and fraught with considerable political, social and economic challenges, cannot be ignored. Digital technology perhaps will help in some sense but allowing a more democratic environment is not only a technical problem. It is also a human problem to take a certain matter forward. Hence, putting forward a single argument to emphasise or refute the democratic potential of the internet and social media is risky, particularly within an environment that is still dynamic and evolving constantly.

9.3 Contribution to knowledge

This study is highly interdisciplinary and might be of interest to scholars from a variety of fields within social science research (e.g. information studies, internet studies, media and communication, and politics). It is located in an increasingly important debate about how digitally networked technologies might — or might not — contribute to the development of the democratic process in non-democratic societies, specifically in the Arab Spring countries. While much of the existing literature so far has focused upon Egypt and Tunisia, very little is known about the democratic potential of these technologies within the Libyan context. By reflecting on emergent tendencies and trends that came to characterize a digital Libya, and its evolution over time, this study fills some gaps in the body of knowledge. It provides new insights into a particular context at a particular time in history by extending the scope of investigation to cover not only the time of the uprising but also the post-uprising period (2011-2016), with a glimpse into the pre-uprising Libyan context.

This research goes beyond the two opposing models of understanding the democratic potential of internet and social media: ‘cyber-optimism’ (Shirky, 2011) versus ‘pessimism’ (Morozov, 2011). Rather, it attempts to understand the technology’s complex impact, and even sometimes its contradictory effects on social change and democratic transformation. Most importantly this research was the first that explored digital media within the Libyan context using Habermas’ (1989) public sphere concept as a starting point, before exploring different critiques and alternative arguments around it, and how the technology advancements have transformed and redefined people’s conceptualisations of it. The importance of this research lies in drawing on empirical data rather than only engaging with theoretical debates and arguments, because the reality is more nuanced.

Through its theoretical and empirical engagement, this study has contributed to the academic debate by expanding on the idea of competing, complex, and affective publics (Fraser, 1990; Tufekci, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015) to consider the nature of the emergent networked public and public sphere post-Arab Spring, rather than the single, overarching notion of the original Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1989). It highlighted the shifting and dynamic nature of publics by tracing how over time the Libyan emergent networked public sphere evolved, changing digital use, practices, and attitudes. This study extends the understanding of the nature of the emergent networked public sphere as a dynamic process that does not exist in a vacuum, free of political, social, ideological and even historical constraints. It offers a richer account of how historical complex issues continued to define and shape present narratives online and offline in Libya, although it described a different conflict. Libyan society has been developed through a period of history full of challenges: from colonization, to an authoritarian regime, to a bloody revolution that turned into a civil war. The society suffers from longstanding regional and tribal cleavages, where the country was organized into three regions back to the colonial era: Tripolitania in the west, Cyrenaica in the east, and Fezzan in the south. These cleavages were reanimated and brought to the fore in the post-uprising period, and the existence of rival governments, one in the east and the other in the west reflects this. As a result, the networked public sphere became merely a reflection of what was happening on the ground, rather than creating an alternative layer that would have somehow been better for debate and deliberation. This demonstrates that to understand online polarisation, in particular social contexts, we need to understand the underlying socio-cultural dynamics to identify and explain the dynamics of fragmentation. Rather than only applying Western models of

social fragmentation (Papacharissi, 2009; Antony & Thomas, 2010; Tufekci, 2017), researchers should integrate local cultural variables (e.g. tribal and regional divisions) into their analyses.

This study has also contributed to the academic debate by showing how the advent of technology within the Libyan context was fraught with formidable political, social, and economic challenges, that hindered the development of the public sphere. New technologies might have helped to challenge the government's control over the public sphere, creating publics and progressing their participation, but were not, on their own, sufficient for democratic advancement. It was shown that the success or failure of digital media to effect democratic transformation is highly dependent on what users can do with digital tools rather than how many users there are. While social media may help to mobilise populations, this does not mean itself lead to achieving gains or to sustaining movements. The massive growth in public access to social media is not enough for democracy to be fully and entirely exercised. After around five years of struggle, the revolutionaries appeared to lose their enthusiasm for change and have not yet produced the radical change of the Libyan political system that they had hoped for. The struggle for democracy, therefore, is not only a technical problem; it is also a human problem with much more complex challenges, not least the issue of bringing together a complex society.

This research also took part in the debate (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015) regarding how the emotional register was key in shaping communities and driving movements particularly during the Egyptian uprising. As part of the findings this research expanded further on this and discussed how the nascent transitional public sphere remained emotional after the uprising but was characterised by uncertainty rather than conformity. Within the Libyan context, the networked publics saw a dynamic shift – from euphoric in the immediate aftermath of the revolution to chaotic, uncertain and polarised in the following years. This development suggests that the emotional aspect has always been a part of the construction of the political expression in Libya, and has never been akin to that of a rationally based democratic discussion in Habermas' sense (Habermas, 1989). This study makes it clear that technology has fundamentally transformed the public sphere, but the direction of that transformation has remained uncertain.

9.4 Methodological contribution

This study draws its conclusions from a large volume of data, employing a triangulation of data-collection techniques: qualitative semi-structured interviews with young people and Facebook content analysis of two selected pages. The combination of different types of data was the most effective in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter from different angles. It has also increased the validity of the research because young participants' stories and their lived experiences were combined and checked against actual Facebook messages, offering in-depth explanations of a less-researched area among the Arab Spring countries. The success in gathering interview data in particular while the country was under ongoing conflict, to make this research possible, is itself a major contribution due to difficulties in recruiting participants (see Section 4.5.1.3 for recruitment difficulties). What is also unique about this research is that its focus was not limited to the uprising time. Rather than focusing on immediate events (Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2016; Tufekci, 2017), this study has extended its time frame to include the aftermath of the revolution, providing a longer view and comprehensive picture of changes of Libya's political transformation and the roles digital media played in it.

The study also contributes to knowledge by dealing with a variety of data that represented different perspectives and views rather than focusing on a certain group. Unlike previous research which mainly focused on the revolutionary side such as interviewing protesters or analysing certain revolutionary hashtags or Facebook pages (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2016), this study extended the scope of investigation to include a broad range of existing political groups, mainly revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries. By doing so, this study captured various perspectives, emotions and different lived experiences, enabling interested readers to have a better understanding of the ways in which ideologies, political views, and narratives of competing camps were manifested in the networked public sphere in Libya.

Another area of methodological contribution is that this research adds to the existing literature on research ethics through developing important methodological insights around the challenges of conducting social media research, and the ethics of research in conflict zones. Considering the haphazard situation in Libya, the study applied 'situational ethics', an approach that entails constant reflections on the used methods and the data worth

exposing in an unpredictable field (Tracy, 2010). By doing so, this study contributes to the existing knowledge by further highlighting the importance of building contingency plans for any unanticipated problems with data collection and presentation (e.g. removal of public Facebook pages, inability to recruit participants in person). For example, due to the removal of the 'Day of Rage' Facebook page which was initially planned to be analysed, another strategy was adopted which involved a selection of a sample of the most popular public Facebook pages, where online discussion is mostly of a political nature. Given the increasing violence in Libya, the 'situational ethics' also resulted in changing the plan of conducting interviews in person to conduct Skype interviews to avoid putting the researcher and participants at risk.

This study also adds to the existing literature on internet research ethics by addressing ethical concerns in relation to the fragility of social media. The dynamic nature of digital content brought a number of methodological challenges and consequences for the research that required new methodological considerations. In this research, the disappearance of the LW Facebook page had ethical implications for those whose social media information was gathered and analysed, entailing further critiques on the researcher's ethical decisions in the presentation of the research findings to protect unaware participants (Light & McGrath, 2010; Tracy, 2010; Reilly & Trevisan, 2016). Therefore, rather than only anonymising the Facebook data, it was also decided to anonymise the Facebook pages themselves. The focus was not only in relation to exploring the nature of the Facebook content, but also focused on how best to convey opinions and narratives without exposing unaware participants to potential harm, also taking into account their 'right to be forgotten' (Sarikakis & Winter, 2017). Examining these ethical implications is one of the most important methodological contributions of this research (see Section 4.7 for further details).

9.5 Practical implications

Understanding the complex and contested nature of the emergent networked public sphere in Libya cannot overnight provide a magic solution for democratizing the country or turning its tragedy to joy. However, the insights gained from this research could offer practical implications for local governments and international community in order to shape social media to be a more positive aspect of the political sphere.

9.5.1 Local government

Since the presence of rival governments in the country is creating a real barrier for the effective functioning of central authority, local government could contribute to the improvement of the democratic and reconstruction process in the country. Social media should be at the heart of any activities for these local governments to engage audiences, and breed trust in the political process that appeared to be lost recently according to the study findings. This might benefit political practice in Libya and could form a bridge between the governments and citizens. Multiple actions could be undertaken such as: (1) supporting NGOs and engaging with them in many sectors and activities such as politics, education, health, digital inclusion, human rights, youth empowerment and dialogue initiatives, etc.; (2) making information about these activities available for publics in both forms, digital and traditional, due to the fact that internet is not universally available across the country. In this way, citizens can monitor and evaluate governments' activities, thus holding leaders accountable and increasing communication and transparency between government and citizens.

9.5.2 International community

The findings would also be of direct interest to international organisations that work directly with digital media and engage with young people for the purposes of peace-building and conflict transformation. Although there are many international organizations have been working in Libya to promote national reconciliation such as the United Nations Support Mission for Libya (UNSMIL)³³, the study shows that there is an increase distrust in Western organisations missions as well as the political process in general. Since this is the case, such organisations should place importance on how to design and conduct their future activities particularly those directed towards Libyan youth, being aware that young people are increasingly resigned from practicing politics. This could be through using social media as a tool of persuasion and outreach campaigns through tailoring personalised campaign messages to young people's needs and interests. What is needed is motivating people to deliberate politics and even compete against one another, with the aim of translating these online deliberations into offline actions, otherwise social media can "too easily just remain words in the air" (Lynch, 2006, p.54), without necessarily causing changing on the ground.

³³ This is an integrated special political mission established on 16 September 2011 by UN Security Council Resolution 2009 (2011) to support the country's new transitional authorities in their post-conflict efforts.

More efforts and assistance are also greatly needed to reach out young people from different actors and organizations such as Libyan diaspora activists. These actors should harness their potential through: (1) funding and developing projects for local activists from across the country in order to bring them together in an inclusive atmosphere that is important for reconciliation and dialogue; (2) providing them the necessary trainings on digital media use and digital security so that they can create local networks able to produce high quality information without being exposed to threats, specifically at critical moments and in the absence of digital rights legislation. This could also help to mitigate the spread of rumours and fake news at a national level, thus allowing for healthy debate and discussion to emerge based on reliable information and news. However, providing reliable information and reaching out communities could be a challenge due to the fact that the internet connectivity is still limited in Libya despite the growth in the number of internet users. Therefore, (3) enhancing digital inclusion in the country is an important issue that international actors should aim to work on. They can work together with NGO members and local governments to contribute to building a more inclusive information society by providing the necessary technical and financial support (e.g. digital equipment, training). They can also learn about some successful examples and models around the world, and then copy and apply them in Libya. One approach, for example, that could be very useful is the use of mesh networks, a type of network that has been successfully used in Cuba. It is a workaround that allows people to connect with one another by opening their Wi-Fi networks to incoming traffic (Rushkoff, 2011). One important advantage of this network is its resistance to surveillance, which is very important within the Libyan context to help people avoid possible threats. It is also a highly adaptable network because it can simply re-connect through a different route if one connection fails. This flexibility is certainly useful in the Libyan environment which is witnessing frequent electricity outages and recurrent damage in the telecommunication infrastructure due to the ongoing conflict.

9.6 Limitations and future research

While this study has successfully advanced our understanding of the nature of the Libyan networked public sphere and its evolution over the past years, there were a number of issues that must be acknowledged to be taken into consideration and pursued in future research. Firstly, the demographic scope of this study was deliberately limited to young people, as they were the dominant group using the internet in the country (Salem, Mourtada, & Al-Saher, 2014). Therefore, future work can expand to other age groups to explore their use

of digital technology and compare the findings. For example, the generation that is growing up who were children in the revolution might reveal interesting findings as they are growing up in intense, violent and polarised environment, where tribalism is not any longer buried deep under the surface. It would be useful to explore the consequences of the fighting today and the legacy it will leave for these generations, and whether this impact their social media use and practices that could produce further polarisation and feud.

This study collected its data from three main cities across the country to ensure diversity and obtain a variety of thoughts and experiences. However, more studies and efforts are needed to explore how citizens in other cities or non-urban areas with no or less internet access experienced the revolution and its aftermath such as displaced communities (e.g. the citizens of Tawargha city³⁴ or those people of West Libyan origin who claimed to be kicked out of Benghazi at the height of Operation Dignity in 2014). Exploring the experiences of these groups can help to produce a wider picture and understand in more depth the complex Libyan context. An important extension of this research would be taking the investigation outside the country to explore whether Libyans in exile (e.g. Libyan diasporic communities) continue using technology to play a role in Libya's transition, or whether they have lost interest in politics as locals. This would be a fruitful area for further work.

Another important area for future research is including different types of social media data. In this study, the digital content was limited to Facebook due to the popularity of the platform among young Libyans (Salem et al., 2014). Thus, it would be interesting if further work extended to other Facebook pages as well as other types of platforms. Twitter could be a good choice for future work, particularly the findings showing that Twitter became increasingly popular among the study participants. It would be also beneficial to apply a mixed methods approach to provide a richer picture of the relationship between technology and the development of the democratic process in non-democratic societies. This study also revealed directions for further work on the fragility and the fluidity of social media data, and how social media content are dynamic, which is an important topic that has many ethical and methodological implications.

Taken together, this study serves as a good foundation for further research in the country, and opens up many opportunities for additional research in the area of how digitally

³⁴ A ghost town in Libya that was used as a centre of military operations against Misrata, which rose up against Gaddafi in February 2011. It was the site of intense fighting during the uprising before its ethnic cleansing by anti-Gaddafi forces in August 2011.

networked technologies might — or might not — contribute to the development of the public sphere. As the situation in Libya is dynamic, and the internet and social media landscape continue to evolve, the need for more research remains fundamental to contribute to the narrative of the Arab Spring uprisings and their aftermath.

9.7 Closing statement

In each revolution “a short ‘honeymoon’ period follows the fall of the old regime, lasting until the ‘contradictory elements’ among the victorious revolutionaries assert themselves” (Brinton, 1965, p. 91). This suggests that the failures, chaos and polarisation illuminated in this thesis are perhaps an inevitable part of the political or social change. Although it is important to take into account that democratizing a complex society such as Libya might be elusive, unpredictable and could take different paths and trajectories, there were many examples of struggles that eventually succeeded were often chaotic and preceded by violence and war such as the French Revolution and Rwanda civil war. Digital technology might help but of course it is not the only element or driver to achieve the ultimate goal, and understanding its effects may still require a long stretch of time.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Libya profile – Timeline

A chronology of key events:

Anti-regime uprising

2011 February - Inspired by revolts in the neighbouring Egypt and Tunisia, street protests break out in Benghazi, spread to other cities, leading to escalating clashes between Gaddafi forces and rebels.

2011 March - UN Security Council authorises a no-fly zone over Libya and air strikes to protect civilians, over which NATO assumes command.

2011 July - The International Contact Group on Libya formally recognises the main opposition group, the National Transitional Council (NTC), as the legitimate government of Libya.

2011 August - Col Gaddafi goes into hiding after rebels swarm into his fortress compound in Tripoli.

2011 August-September - African Union joins 60 countries which have recognised the NTC as the new Libyan authority.

2011 20 October - Col Gaddafi is captured and killed as rebel fighters take his hometown Sirte. Three days later, the NTC declares Libya to be officially "liberated" and announces plans to hold elections within eight months.

2011 November - Saif al-Islam, the son of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, is captured.

2012 January-March - Clashes erupt between former rebel forces in Benghazi in sign of discontent with the NTC. Benghazi-based NTC officials campaign to re-establish autonomy for the region, further increasing tension with the NTC in Tripoli.

2012 August - Transitional government hands power to the General National Congress, which was elected in July.

Benghazi attack

2012 September - US ambassador and three other Americans are killed when Islamist militants, including Ansar al-Sharia, storm the consulate in Benghazi.

2013 August - Petroleum Facilities Guard militia begins blockade of oil export terminals.

Civil war

2014 February - Protests erupt in response to the General National Congress refusal to disband after mandate expires.

2014 April - Petroleum Facilities Guard militia lifts closure of two oil terminals.

2014 May - "Libyan National Army" renegade general Khalifa Haftar launches military assault including airstrikes against militant Islamist groups in Benghazi; tries to seize parliament building, accusing Prime Minister Ahmed Maiteg of being in thrall to Islamist groups.

2014 June - Prime Minister Maiteg resigns after supreme court rules his appointment illegal.

New parliament chosen in elections marred by a low turn-out attributed to security fears and boycotts; Islamists suffer heavy defeat. Fighting breaks out between forces loyal to outgoing GNC and new parliament.

2014 July - UN staff pull out, embassies shut, foreigners evacuated as security situation deteriorates. Tripoli international airport is largely destroyed by fighting.

Ansar al-Sharia seizes control of most of Benghazi.

Islamic State intervenes

2014 October - UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon visits to continue UN-brokered talks between the new parliament and government based in Tobruk and Islamist Libya Dawn militias holding Tripoli. UN says 100,000s displaced by clashes.

Islamic State extremist militia seizes control of port of Derna in eastern Libya.

2015 January - Libyan army and Tripoli-based militia alliance declare partial ceasefire after UN-sponsored talks in Geneva.

2015 February - Egyptian jets bomb Islamic State targets in Derna, a day after the group there released a video showing the beheading of 21 Egyptian Christians.

Libyan Army offensive to retake Derna in March fails to dislodge the group. IS establishes control over port-city of Sirte, halfway along coast between Tripoli and Benghazi.

2015 July - A Tripoli court sentences Gaddafi's sons Saif al-Islam and eight other former officials to death for crimes committed during the 2011 uprising against his father. He is later freed by an armed group.

2016 January - UN announces new, Tunisia-based interim government, but neither Tobruk nor Tripoli parliaments agree to recognise its authority.

Islamic State group attacks Ras Lanuf oil terminal, threatens to move on to Brega and Tobruk.

Rise of General Haftar

2016 March - New UN-backed Government of National Accord arrives in Tripoli by boat after opposing forces block airspace.

2016 April - UN staff return to Tripoli after absence of nearly two years.

2016 September - Libyan National Army of Khalifa Haftar seizes key oil export terminals in the east.

2016 December - Pro-government forces oust Islamic State militants from coastal town of Sirte, which they had seized 18 months previously.

2017 July - Islamic State group ejected from Benghazi after three years of fighting.

2018 July - Khalifa Haftar claims that his forces are fully in control of Derna, the last Islamist stronghold in the east and the only city in the region hitherto outside his control.

2018 September - Libya's UN-backed government declares a state of emergency in Tripoli, after dozens of people are killed in clashes between rival militia groups in the city's southern suburbs.

2019 April - The Haftar Libyan National Army advances on Tripoli, sparking clashes with the forces of the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord.

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

Starting the interview	Interview stages
<p>Introducing the research topic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminding the interviewee about the voluntary nature of the interview and the right to withdraw at any time • Ensuring that the environment is secure for confidentiality • Introducing the research topic • Reading the information sheet • Requesting verbal consent while asking the participant to sign the consent form if it has not been already sent by email • Asking for their permission to record the interview 	<p>Starting the interview</p>
<p>Interview questions</p> <p>Can you tell me when you began using social networking websites? Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which social media platform did you use most? Why? • From where did you log in for the internet? • What did you use social media for at this time? Why? 	<p>Questions about the pre-uprising period</p>
<p>Could you tell me about your experience of the uprising, and how did you use social media in that time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you find out about the revolution? • What were the main sources of information on events? (including other types of media and communication channels) • What social media did you use? How did you use it? Why? • How reliable was information? Could you find the information you needed? 	<p>Questions about revolutionary times</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you get involved in the uprising? How? What was your motivation and what you were trying to achieve? • Tell me about your experience during the internet cut-off? What was your source of information during the internet blackout? Did you manage to circumvent the government censorship? 	
<p>Could you tell me about your experience of the post-uprising period, and how did you use social media in that time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you tell me where you were and what you were doing in that time? Were you involved in the post-uprising period events? How? • What were your main sources of information on events? Why? (including other types of media and communication channels) • What social media networks did you use? How did you use them? Why? Could you tell me what types of pages, groups or accounts you follow? Why? • What sort of political issues have you discussed online? Are there constraints on what you say? Are political issues discussed respectfully? • When emotions were running high, how did you use social media? Did you engage in hostile arguments? • Were you able to criticize or express your opinion about the events or government without fear? Were there any restrictions? • Do you think that social media websites are credible information and news sources? How do you perceive the credibility of social media? How do you verify information you receive through social media? What about TV? • What are your thoughts about social media: whether it is a united tool bringing people closer together or a divisive tool causing rifts within society? 	<p>Questions about the post-uprising period</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you believe that the role of social media in Libya should be?	
Do you have anything else to add about this topic?	Closing statement, to end the interview

Appendix 3: Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Researcher: Skina Ehdeed

Information School, University of Sheffield

Research project title: The Emergence of Libyan Networked Publics: Social Media Use Before, During and After the Libyan Uprising

Invitation:

You are being invited to take part in this research project about better understanding of the Emergence of Libyan Networked Publics: Social Media Use Before, During and After the Libyan Uprising. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask us if there is anything you do not understand or if you would like further information.

What will I do?

I will conduct a 60-90-minute interview about how social media has been used during the revolution and recent events and how young Libyans perceive the impact of social media on their views and attitudes in relation to the uprising and post-uprising period.

When I talk to you I will record your answers and I will collect your personal details. You can decide how much you want to take part. You can also decide not to take part at all.

How will the information be used?

I will use your answers to help me to understand how young Libyans have used social media over time and circumstances. The findings of this study will be published as a part of my Ph.D. thesis.

Your rights:

- I will not use your real name in my report thesis.
- All data will be anonymised and kept safe and private.
- You do not need to take part and you can stop at any time during the interview.
- No one will listen to any records apart from me and my supervisors.

What are the potential risks?

Some emotional pain could be inadvertently caused through the re-opening of old wounds. This may affect you in different ways. It might be annoying and inconvenient for you and you may feel distressed. So, if you feel unhappy or uncomfortable and you want to withdraw during the interview, you can do at any point without giving any explanation. I, as a researcher, can offer rest breaks during the interview if you need. You can invite your close friend or family member to attend the interview if this helps you and makes you feel more comfortable.

There is also a low possibility that discussing politics can lead to threats if you are identified. However, your participation will be totally anonymised. I will not be asking you to sign this consent form with your real name. I will keep your contact details and the interview record separate from each other and they will be uploaded to a safe location.

If you are not happy or have questions you can speak or write to the university:

Skina Ehdeed, the researcher smtehdeed1@sheffield.ac.uk +44(0)7475073248

Dr Jo Bates, first supervisor jo.bates@sheffield.ac.uk +44 (0)114 222
2648

Dr Andrew Cox, second supervisor a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk +44 (0)114 222
6347

Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form

Participant consent form

The University of Sheffield. Information School	The Emergence of Libyan Networked Publics: Social Media Use Before, During and After the Libyan Uprising
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Researchers

Skina Ehdeed, the researcher	smttehdeed1@sheffield.ac.uk	Room 318
Dr. Jo Bates, first supervisor 236	jo.bates@sheffield.ac.uk	Room
Dr. Andrew Cox, second supervisor 222	a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk	Room

Purpose of the research

The purpose of the research is to investigate the nature of the emergent Libyan networked public sphere, and how has it evolved over the past few years. More specifically, it focuses on three critical phases: immediately before, during, and after the uprising, covering primarily the period between 2011-2016, with a brief a glance at Libya's public sphere in the pre-uprising period.

Who will be participating?

We are inviting young people between the ages of 25 and 35 to participate in this study.

What will you be asked to do?

We will conduct a 60-90 minute interview about how social media has been used and experienced during the Libyan uprising and its aftermath.

What are the potential risks of participating?

Some emotional pain could be inadvertently caused through the re-opening of old wounds. This may affect you in different ways. It might be annoying and inconvenient for you and you may feel distressed. So, if you feel unhappy or uncomfortable and you want to withdraw during the interview, you can do at any point without giving any explanation. I, as a researcher, can offer rest breaks during the interview if you need. You can invite your

close friend or family member to attend the interview if this helps you and makes you feel more comfortable.

Your participation will be completely anonymised. I will not ask you to sign this consent form with your real name. I will keep your contact details and the interview record separate from each other and they will be uploaded to the University of Sheffield Google drive.

What data will we collect?

We are audio recording the interviews and we are collecting personal details.

What will we do with the data?

The interview will be transcribed for analysis to be later included in my Ph.D. thesis or an academic publication in the future. After this point, the data might be stored in a secure place to be used later for conducting future research. Apart from me and the project's supervisors nobody else will have access to these data.

Will my participation be confidential?

We are anonymising the data and uploading the records to a safe location on the University of Sheffield Google drive. I will not ask you to sign this consent form with your real name. I will keep your contact details and the interview record separate from each other. Both of them will be uploaded to the University of Sheffield Google drive which is secure and safe. My laptop is also protected by password.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of this study will be published as a part of my Ph.D. dissertation. The results of this research also may be reported in journal papers and conferences.

I confirm that I have read and understand the description of the research project, and that I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the project.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.

I understand that I may decline to answer any particular question or questions, or to do any of the activities. If I stop participating at all time, all of my data will be purged.

I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential, that my name or identity will not be linked to any research materials, and that I will not be identified or identifiable in any report or reports that result from the research.

I give permission for the research team members to have access to my anonymised responses.

I give permission for the research team to re-use my data for future research as specified above.

I agree to take part in the research project as described above.

Participant Name

Participant Signature

Researcher Name

Researcher Signature

Date

Note: If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Jo Bates, Research Ethics Coordinator, Information School, The University of Sheffield (ischool_ethics@sheffield.ac.uk), or to the University Registrar and Secretary.

Appendix 5: Research Ethics Approval Letter



Downloaded : 22/10/2015
Approved : 14/09/2015

Skina Musbah T Ehdeed
Registration number: 140249466
Information School
Programme: INFR33 Information Studies (Social)

Dear Skina Musbah T

PROJECT TITLE: The influence of social media on shaping Libyans attitudes towards 17th February revolution and beyond

APPLICATION: Reference Number 006117

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 14/09/2015 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 006117 (dated 12/08/2015).
- Participant information sheet 1011858 version 1 (03/08/2015).
- Participant consent form 1011859 version 1 (03/08/2015).

The following optional amendments were suggested:

The student is clearly well aware of the potential risks regarding her data collection and has taken them into account in a very detailed way. I can understand why you want to do some fieldwork in situ, and the rationale for collecting data from Tripoli but not from Benghazi or Sebha seems logical - but given the points you make in D5 regarding female safety, I recommend that you consider again the methodological implications of conducting entirely Skype-based interviews. It would be prudent to consider skype-based interviews. Also it should be noted that care should be taken when releasing data to Facebook, ensure the group or account you create is setup correctly in privacy settings. Finally it would be wise to ensure that you do not keep copies of interviews on your laptop or anywhere locally. Perhaps simply upload all data at the end of each day to the Google Drive (making sure there is a backup copy - or as mentioned use the iSchool research server). Please see the comments above C3 personal safety; D2 recruiting potential participants; D3 consent.

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](#) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

Matt Jones
Ethics Administrator
Information School