January 14, 2011 President Zine El-‘Abidine Ben ‘Ali flees the country of Tunisia and resigns from his presidency. Thousands of people – men, women, children, the young, the old, the rich, the poor, Islamists, and Secularists – joined together to rebel against the unjust rule of President Ben Ali. Although the President had seemed to promote ideas of Democracy, he was actually leading a dictatorship. Since 1987, the people of Tunisia suffocated under his rule. There were many attempts to force him out of his position, but none prevailed. Why after over 24 years could citizens of Tunisia finally overthrow Ben Ali? Citizens of Tunisia had a new tool called ‘social media’. For the first time, people of all classes and genders could openly share their thoughts and opinions on the state of their government. They could share messages online instantly anytime and anywhere. Platforms of social media exposed the ugly truths about the state of Tunisia’s flawed Democracy and gradually united people to face the might of the police force. Citizens placed themselves in great danger simply to eliminate Ben Ali’s rule. Research findings from psychologists Stanley Milgram, Solomon Asch, and Eric Fromm explain how a revolutionary tool originally designed for sharing positive moments of life evolved into an indirect weapon. Social media acts as an extension of power for traditional methods of revolt and protest. The design of many social media platforms unintentionally reinforces disobedient thinking by providing
a “safe virtual space” where citizens may share uncensored content where they can freely criticize the government.

Social media had many functions in the eventual overthrowing of President Ben Ali. This paper will discuss those functions and how they apply to the case of the Tunisian Revolution of 2011. Before delving into those ideas, it’s important to understand the history of the events leading up to Ben Ali’s retreat from Tunisia. This will reduce confusion as to the purpose of the protests. The paper will also explain social media’s success using fundamental concepts of disobedience. Once background knowledge has been established, this paper will discuss why social media stands as an effective tool for disobedience and why the Tunisian government struggles to control it compared to other forms of media. After that subtopic, I’ll explore the power of social conformity that social media holds. The information will uncover how even the most resilient of loyalists to Ben Ali could not resist the temptation to follow a majority rule. Lastly, I will discuss the importance of the protection of social media from censorship and how it highlights the importance of disobedience through a societal and moral lens. Each of these fundamental concepts of disobedience are pivotal in understanding social media’s involvement in the resignation of President Ben Ali.

**Ingredients for Revolution**

Tunisia, like many new democratic nations, had difficulty transitioning to Democracy. Citizens of every class trusted that new president Ben Ali would help establish their new government upon his election in 1987. For a while, the new president seemed to fulfill his role exceptionally well. He had promised to support the growth of businesses and received massive amounts of foreign financial aid. However, his hidden misdeeds slowly began to surface in the eyes of the public. Originally promising support for the expansion of businesses, the president instead secretly
capitalized on the profits of both the private and public-sector firms of the country. Consequently, this brought many new issues to the state of Tunisia as Michelle Angrist describes in her article “Understanding the Success of Mass Civic Protest in Tunisia”. The president’s tyrannical move had “hurt Tunisia’s textile industry…widened rich-poor gaps…” and to make matters worse, the effect of the economic recession in 2008 “led to rising food costs (Angrist 548).” Tunisia had no longer been run as a Democracy. The government transformed into an Autocracy. The country’s people were in shambles. They needed a spark. They needed a reason to rebel and ignite the fuel of economic instability. That spark came when Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26 year old university educated fruit vendor, set himself on fire in anguish of his oppression to find better work that suited his education. Bouazizi’s self-immolation encouraged the fuel of economic depression to set ablaze. In her article, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East”, Eva Bellin suggests that Bouazizi symbolized the “callous humiliation by state officials [that] emblematized the disrespect so many Tunisians had felt (11).” Ben Ali was stunting the economic growth of the country. Messages of the event quickly spread through every popular form of social media. Bouazizi finally died from his injuries on January 4th of the next year. Following his death, political activism and protesting surged. For ten days, relentless protests seemed to swarm the entire country. The police were unable to cease the resistance. Ben Ali’s last hope was protection from the military. They refused to defend him. Ben Ali had no choice but to leave the country and resign from presidency.

**The Social Shield**

It’s shocking how little fear Tunisian political activists had when protesting. With any form of media, Arabian governments typically censor any voice that dares to mock them. Punishment for speaking out against the government is harsh and sometimes painful. Yet with severe consequences at
stake, political activism skyrocketed on many social media platforms. There exists a special characteristic of social media that makes citizens feel that they have power in using these platforms.

Stanley Milgram, world-renowned psychologist, made highly impactful discoveries on the willingness of humans to follow authoritative commands, even when those commands violate one’s own morals. To demonstrate this effect, in “The Perils of Obedience”, Milgram wrote that he arranged a classroom type simulation. He hired a moderator to pretend playing the role as the actual psychologist, and a learner who would be the same learner in every trial of the experiment. The true test subject played the role of teacher. In the experiment, the teacher would repeat a series of word pairs to the learner. The teacher would then vocalize a series of multiple choice test questions where the learner would have to correctly identify the word that pairs with the word from the question. If the learner fails to match the correct word, the learner will receive an electric shock. Each failed attempt results in an electric shock more powerful than the last, until the maximum voltage level of 450 volts. The learner was not truly being shocked. In fact, while the experiment was marketed as a learning test, it was really a test on the teacher’s willingness to obey the authority figure’s (experimenter) assurance to shock the learner.

One particular version of the experiment involved placing the moderator in another room where the only communication present was telephone. This version was designed to test differences found in the behavior of a subject when the authority figure was not physically present in the testing room. The results were astounding! According to Milgram, “…only a third as many people were fully obedient through 450 volts [shocking the learner] (86).” There seems to be an effect where the human brain dissipates the influence of an authority figure when no symbols of power are physically present to threaten the teacher. The teacher’s brain does not perceive any imminent danger or consequence
from disobeying an authority figure as the authority loses his punishment capabilities upon leaving the room.

We see this effect on the brain in the case of social media usage in the Tunisian Revolution of 2011. In Julian York’s “The Arab Digital Vanguard”, York writes, “In countries where political discussion was taboo and crossing red lines—such as discussion of the ruling family, or debates about Islam—resulted in persecution of journalists, web forums created new spaces, outside of society, where political discussion was relatively safe (34).” Normally, taking part in protest related activities could be repressed by the Tunisian police. Even when television news channels and newspapers scatter news of the government’s whereabouts, police and the government retain the ability to repress the content distributors before the content is exposed to the public. Police have this power since the origin of the content’s development have easily discoverable locations, such as a newspaper company building. Social media however acts as a sort of shield against this force. The tool can be used to share thoughts on politics without a direct figure of authority next to them, whether that be a police officer or government official. While it can be argued that social media users can be tracked with their real name to their real living destination the same way as other forms of media, social media users feel greater power over an authority figure due to two crucial design mechanics. Social media users can (1) spread messages instantly and (2) require no approval to broadcast their voice. The Tunisian government loses the ability to censor citizens before their messages are sent. Political activism begins to soar due to this effect.
Power in the Majority

Persuading others to participate in a challenging movement against a higher authority takes extreme measures of benefits to outweigh costs insuring a rebellion’s success. Social media as we’ve explored from earlier certainly serves as an extension of power for one’s voice of opinion. Opportunity for social media’s power has more applications than providing the illusion of comfort to people online. These online platforms can also convince other people to join a rebellion even if they would normally oppose becoming a member.

Social conformity makes this influence effective. It was studied heavily by social psychologist Solomon Asch. Asch was curious how the effect of majority opinions of a group may influence the thoughts and actions of a minority. He devised an experiment where several young males are sit in a long row to guess which line out of a group of three lines had the same length as the test line. Every young man in the room is secretly instructed to answer the question in a specific fashion except for one person who serves as the test subject. This test subject sits near the end of the row of people. Throughout the test, each person places their guess in order from the start of the row to the end in order. Each person generally succeeds in guessing the correct line for each trial. However, once the 3rd or 4th trial arrives, the controlled group suddenly chooses the incorrect answer unanimously. This forces pressure on the test subject. The test subject knows the correct answer, but they cannot mentally tolerate choosing a different answer from the majority of the group. In order to avoid discomfort of polarization from the group, the test subject chooses the group’s wrong answer. Asch calls this phenomenon ‘normative social influence’. His results are staggering. A study without strong incorrect answer support from the group started with an incorrect answer percentage of “less than 1 per cent of the time”. In the trials with the intentional unanimous selection of incorrect answers, the percentage of acceptance of “misleading majority’s wrong judgements…[raised to] 36.8
per cent of the selection (Asch 144).” Test subjects had variability in the strength that the group opinion had on them as well as the test subjects’ resistance level to conforming to the group. However, Asch concluded that singling out a minority through the pressure of a majority greatly increases the minority’s tendency to conform.

Relating to the Tunisian Revolution of 2011, social media enhanced the effectiveness of social conformity by providing an external channel for forcing their majority pressure on others, including Ben Ali’s most loyal groups. Social media platforms have adopted symbols and group features to organize many people together to discuss certain topics in a simple and efficient way. For example, Twitter hashtags allow users to attach a single phrase following a ‘#’ symbol from which Twitter will make those also tweeting the same symbol discoverable to one another. If popular enough, that group will stimulate a larger majority of the app’s user-base. Symbolizing and shortening ideas into singular phrases establishes groups. Their constant feeding of messages including special symbols further expresses their support of the movement. York discusses this effect by stating that “Hashtags have, in many cases, become short-form symbols of protest (38).” Through overflowing social media platforms with massive amounts of the same short symbols with phrases, the design of these platforms conveys large support for the movement, persuading people to support it. The effect relates to Asch’s test subject conforming to the majority group. These symbols of protest spread quickly and have greater potential in reaching out to individuals who may not have originally considered fighting against Ben Ali’s rule. They are not bound to geographical limits as Angrist assures, “Social networking media…helped broaden the composition of the movement from ‘just’ a labor movement to include young members of the middle class and the elite (561).” “Tunisian women” and “small and midsized businesses” were major supporters of Ben Ali (Angrist 551). Yet
they too fell victim to the power of social conformity that social media strengthened. This further weakened Ben Ali’s tight grip of authority on his people.

**The Government is “Evil”**

Reverting to the knowledge in the “Ingredients for Revolution” section of this paper, President Ben Ali took advantage of a poorly organized Democracy and converted it to an Autocracy. Most countries, especially those providing financial aid, were generally unaware of this move. Citizens of Tunisia however knew the truth. They understood the government’s exploitation of the people and recognized an irrational authority. Thus, another powerful application of social media takes advantage of cognitive psychology. Social media uses framing to present the government’s unethical exploitation in a sense that they are the antagonist in a real-world story.

Before we begin furthering this discussion, the concept of irrational authority must be explained. Eric Fromm, sociologist and philosophical thinker, breaks down the concepts of disobedience and how necessary it is to society in his article, “Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem.” Fromm discusses the theory of an authoritarian and humanistic conscience. We will need to understand these two consciences to show irrational authority’s importance to the Tunisian Revolution. Authoritarian conscience relies on a ruler’s people to desire respecting an authority and to be afraid of disrespecting them. Humanistic conscience focuses on positive development of oneself and relying on one’s own opinions and self-assigned rules. Both conscience’s must exist to bring balance in society. Whether or not society agrees, most people follow an authoritarian conscience most of the time. A societal norm exists where disobedience only carries a negative connotation and that only obedience leads to reward. Fromm contends that disobedience is vital to the wellbeing of society and that “…his [man’s] intellectual development was dependent on the capacity for being
disobedient—disobedient to authorities who tried to muzzle new thoughts and to the authority of long-established opinions which declared a change to be nonsense (Fromm 124).” Essentially, by strictly following the authoritarian conscience, society traps itself from improvement. People deem themselves vulnerable to the will of an authority, allowing that authority to control people and their motives like a machine.

Fromm describes problems with this vulnerability using the term ‘irrational authority’. According to him, irrational authority is a relationship where the authority benefits while the subject either does not benefit or suffers. He provides an example using a slave and a slave master, “The slave owner on the other hand, wants to exploit the slave as much as possible. The more he gets out of him the more satisfied he is. At the same time, the slave tries to defend as best he can his claims for a new minimum of happiness (Fromm 126).” Relating this analogy to Tunisia, President Ben Ali acts as the slave master while his people are forced into slavery. Ben Ali pumps money out of the private and public businesses for himself and shrivels employment opportunities for educated citizens.

Clearly, Tunisia serves as a great example of when revolting against an authority is justified. Social media gives an extra boost toward succeeding in protest. First, social media exposes the hidden irrational authority that Ben Ali enforces, educating all of Tunisia, neighboring countries, and anywhere in the world with access to the internet. Anyone in Tunisia that had a smartphone, laptop, or any other internet-connected device could instantly share footage and content showing examples of Ben Ali’s unorthodox punishment and repression of his people. York describes the importance of sharing news through this medium, “The act of witnessing raw events that were previously only available via the reports of foreign correspondents and censored of their most disturbing elements has undoubtedly shifted the thinking of individuals and state actors alike (38).” Once news was spread on the internet, it remained on the internet forever. Activists would post new information of the
government’s wrongful actions daily, angering people throughout the Tunisia and the world. The government had no control over the information. Attempts to control it continuously ruined their reputation on the internet. Ben Ali, would try to block certain social media websites for all the country’s citizens. Being that this virtual space was the only source to converse about the government while avoiding immediate harsh punishment, this move by Ben Ali only increased their frustration, and multiplied Tunisia’s support from the rest of the world. Consistent pressure from the government “led Tunisian bloggers to form a movement for free expression (York 37).” Posting and sharing explicit content about the horrid truth of the Tunisian government’s unjust rule formed a community driven story where Ben Ali was even more of an antagonist than the people of the world had previously perceived. The ability to frame a situation by manipulating the information that spreads serves as another extension of power that political activists in Tunisia had in the revolution.

**Conclusions**

Social media has the power to protect those who wish to openly express their opinions, persuade others to join movements by conformity, and modify the reputation of an establishment by enhancing the emotional effect of the establishment’s antagonistic actions. Each of these powers ultimately crumbles an irrational regime. All of these powers served as extensions to human revolt capabilities that eventually led to Ben Ali fleeing the country and resigning from presidency. Social sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and DailyMotion were weapons that had no effect by themselves. Rather, the very existence of the platforms allowed political activists to avoid censorship and reach other possible protest members that normally would be difficult to reach. After the protests, Tunisia began gradually reforming its government into a Democratic-Republic. The bravery of the protesters as well as their use of social media spread throughout other Arab countries, inspiring other
revolutions for Democracy. The story of the Tunisian Revolution encouraged societies where everyone’s voice matters. These movements pushed for Democratic systems. The series of movements came to be known as the ‘Arab Spring’.
Works Cited


