

## NATIONAL RECONCILIATION IN THE AGE OF NEW SOCIAL MEDIA: The War on Silence in the Tunisian Truth Commission's Facebook-Mediated Public Hearings

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It is difficult not to look on with irony at how the Truth and Dignity Commission's "historic" public hearings, aimed at finally "freeing speech for victims of tyranny," required a special pass to attend; one somehow assumes that freeing speech for all would also entail freeing attendance for all. But the public hearings were not open to the public. You had to be a certified non-governmental organization, a journalist working for a recognized institution, or a known public figure to be granted entry. Securing a pass involved going to the commission's headquarters in the capital, submitting your identification and proof of credentials, and, if approved, returning two days later to pick up your badge. The most problematic thing about this policy was that you had to know about it ahead of time—that you needed a badge to be granted entry—which proved neither intuitive nor obvious to the general public. Most victims assumed they could just show up. Of course, the hearings were televised. But considering the commission's promotional campaigns leading up to the public hearings, which persistently highlighted re-establishing "openness" and "accessibility" as the cornerstones of their mission, reiterating at every turn the "historicity" of this event, people wanted to participate in that history.

The commission held its first public hearing on November 17, 2016, under heavy security. An elevated horizontal banner marked the entrance, flanked by two vertical ones forming an arched, gate-like structure. The horizontal banner announced, in Arabic and English: “Public Hearing Sessions, Tunis 17, 18 November 2016.” The two vertical banners said in capital letters: “FOR US, FOR OUR CHILDREN, FOR OUR NATION.” But only a badge would get you through that gate. Once allowed through, metal detectors marked the first stop. On the other side of these detectors, a group of commission staff looked closely at your badge and told you where to go based on the title listed on your credentials.

These security measures and the hierarchical seating arrangements only added to the spectacular intensity of the scene. A lineup of fancy cars, formally dressed high-profile public figures, rarely-seen-in-such-finery civil society actors, all arrived under flashing camera lights. More than twenty-five journalists from local and international news outlets were crowded into the front porch of the main building, snapping photos and homing in to interview public figures as they arrived. In the middle of this glittering celebrity ambience stood a handful of the mothers of the martyrs of the revolution, holding framed photos of their dead sons, protesting outside the building because they were not allowed inside the main hall.

Meanwhile, those of us in the lobby were also trying to find a way into the main hall where the hearing would take place; not everyone would be allowed to enter. The commission had set up three separate halls, for three hierarchical guest categories. The main hall with the commissioners and the witnesses was for “invited guests” only. Journalists were divided into written press and live media. Only live media journalists could gain access into the main hall. A much smaller hall on the ground floor of the same building held members of the written press. This room looked like a bare cafeteria with a small, fifty-inch TV screen mounted on the wall. The third “hall” was a huge tent set up outside the building, with a large screen for “excess audience.”

The written press—clearly marked as ranking lowest in the hierarchy of guests—were not pleased. One of the journalists went looking for the head of media relations and started yelling at him: this is “an outrage,” she shouted. “Why on earth would we come all the way here to sit and watch via a screen? I could have done that from the comfort of my couch at home! We are journalists, we are supposed to be inside the room, and recording everything live, not only what you choose to include in your [camera] frame!”<sup>1</sup>

As an ethnographer, I felt the same anxiety; I had to get myself into the main hall. I found someone who introduced me to the head of media relations. He asked me for whom I was writing. I told him I was a PhD student working on a research project about the TDC. That did not get me through the door, but my New York affiliation did. He said, “OK, but if I let you in, you have to stay for the whole thing. I can’t have it look like people are getting bored or uninterested halfway through the hearings.” I assured him that I would glue myself to my chair until the very last word spoken.

So finally, I walked into a fully packed main hall with people standing in a crowd in the back. I found an empty seat. It happened to be behind a lineup of three high-ranking UN officials who looked extremely bored. These were the kind of high-profile officials who only showed up to high-visibility events: they did not form part of the local team working in this particular country. They had their headsets for simultaneous translation hanging around their necks. The hearings were to proceed in Arabic; onsite translators were ready to provide instant English and French translation.

Forty-five minutes past the planned start time, the national anthem finally announced the commencement of the hearing. Everybody quieted down and stood up. The hearing had begun.<sup>2</sup>

—Fieldnotes, November 17, 2016, Tunis

Tunisia had launched its Truth and Dignity Commission (TDC) to investigate ousted president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s historical human rights violations against more than 62,000 victims in the wake of the Arab Spring, in 2014. Following best practices of the international human rights instruments on which it was modeled, the TDC organized a series of public hearings in which victims narrated testimonies of the violence they had suffered. In her opening remarks at the first public hearing, TDC President Sihem Bensedrine summarized the objective of the hearings as follows:

We are gathered here to rehabilitate [*i’ādat ta’hīl*] the people of Tunisia. . . . The public hearings are designed in the first place to provide those victims reduced to silence for a long time with a voice. They are also aimed at providing an overview, information to society as a whole, about the violations of rights and dignity that were taking place behind closed doors. Ultimately, these public hearings are designed to expose the tormentors who

have blighted our society, which we are all required to protect by combatting oblivion and preserving memory.

Truth commissions attribute a broad list of accomplishments to truth-telling (see [Daly 2008](#); [Mendeloff 2004](#)). Of these, perhaps least clear is their role in national reconciliation. One explanation for truth commissions' contribution to national reconciliation is so pervasive that it has attained the level of common sense: the idea that "speaking is healing." This comes to clear expression in a foreword to the second edition of [Priscilla Hayner's \(2011, xiii\)](#) book on truth commissions, in which Kofi Annan, the former secretary-general of the United Nations, states: "It is clear that national healing can be a halting and painful process. But ultimately, it seems that many of our natural instincts are confirmed: while the truth is painful, burying the past is much less likely to lead a country to a healthy future."

A similar thought was put differently by the International Center for Transitional Justice, which states that public hearings offer "platforms of truth, dignity, and catharsis," with "potentially cathartic power for victims and their families, but also the public at large, by generating solidarity and empathy for the suffering of others." Through these hearings, entire sectors of society previously numb to the pain of victims may find within them "a renewed sense of solidarity" ([ICTJ 2017](#)). The Tunisian TDC upheld this value of truth-telling, and 77 percent of Tunisians agreed with it, naming "revealing the truth" as the most important course toward national reconciliation ([TDC 2019, 546](#)).

In this article, I challenge this assumed relation between truth-telling and reconciliation by bringing attention to the understudied role of new social media in the *mediation* of these public testimonies. Within the context of debates about the role of new social media in democratization efforts, on one hand, and ambivalence about their effects on social relationships, on the other, I ask: How has publicizing testimonies of suffering come to be equated with the public good and cast as key to reconciliation efforts? How has social media—driving narrative, shaping audience bubbles, emboldening impassioned mobs—cast doubt on this simplistic liberal vision that celebrates *speaking* as synonymous with *healing*?

In what follows, I argue that social media platforms have altered the role of the truth—of voice, of speaking, of knowing, of being informed, and of listening—and of public testimonies in national reconciliation efforts. Through a study of their algorithmic drive for more content, I propose that social media platforms have essentially declared a "war on silence." I analyze silence as a "gap in knowledge" and "war on silence" as these platforms' algorithmic drive to eliminate such

gaps by maintaining a ceaseless flow of content. I suggest that one of the less analyzed consequences of this endless stream of content is quantity becoming confused for a sufficiency of information to make decisions about our relationship to others. While “voice” has been celebrated and “silence” decried in human rights discourse, I argue that silence can constitute an important condition that can help maintain the bedrock of strangers’ empathy and mediate national reconciliation. Essentially, this essay offers a study of the role of new social media in national reconciliation efforts.

### **STRUCTURE AND LOGISTICS OF THE TDC’S PUBLIC HEARINGS**

By the end of its four-year tenure, the TDC had conducted more than 49,000 private hearings and a total of 14 public hearings, held at irregular intervals ranging from three hearings per month to none for three months, extending over a period of two years, between November 2016 and December 2018. The public hearings featured a total of 108 testimonies.

On November 17, 2016, the commission held its first public hearing at one of the ousted president’s former properties in the capital’s wealthy northern suburb.<sup>3</sup> It lasted more than four hours and featured the testimonies of six victims, representing four different victim groups. Such testimonies are usually presented by victims themselves or, in the case of the murdered or forcibly disappeared, by surviving family members. The first testimony was given by three mothers of demonstrators killed by police fire during the 2011 demonstrations. The second testimony came from the mother and wife of an Islamist party member who was forcibly disappeared. The third witness was a former student union member and Islamist prisoner known as a public intellectual and academic. Another public intellectual, a former *Perspective* (Marxist left) prisoner and the most famous of the persons testifying, gave the final testimony. Testimonies ranged from thirty to forty-five minutes. The event lasted from 9 p.m. until 2 a.m. on a Thursday night. The second public hearing was held the next day. They were held back to back because the TDC wanted the first hearing to have a representative range of victim groups. Considering the large number of those victim groups, they decided to divide the testimonies over two nights. Both hearings and all those that followed were live-streamed on Facebook.

Given the highly politicized context, the commission was careful about its selection criteria. Hearings were equally representative of: the diverse range of victim groups; the type of violation (torture, forced disappearance, violation of the right to make a living, etc.); region (the commission did not want to reproduce the

former regime's favoritism toward coastal cities and marginalization of the interior regions); historical period (they did not want to favor more recent violations over historical ones); and gender (TDC 2018, 85–86). That said, the commission was created by an Islamist-majority government, and Islamists made up the largest victim group due to their systematic persecution by the former regime in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>4</sup> As a result, despite their efforts, commentators perceived the TDC as favoring Islamists over other victims, namely, secularists—a national impression that would cloud every element of the TDC, including its public hearings.

### NEW SOCIAL MEDIA, DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS, AND IMAGINED PUBLICS

Throughout history, the advent of new information technologies has often empowered successive waves of people at the expense of traditional power brokers. . . . Then as now, access to information and to new communication channels meant new opportunities to participate, to hold power to account and to direct the course of one's life with greater agency.

—Google executives [Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen](#), *The Digital Age*

Unchecked optimism hailed new social media's potential as the engine of information, dissemination, and participation in its early years. Truth commissions, meanwhile, proclaimed their unwavering commitment to granting victims voice, exposing the truth, and safeguarding people's right to information. In this context, truth, information, and freedom of speech are often exalted and equated with the public good. I want to question this presumed relation between speaking out and the public good: Is it safe to assume that publicizing testimonies of violence always has a positive effect on the unity of a political collective? How have these platforms' modes of content circulation altered the established value of "speaking out" in democratic politics and of giving victims' "voice" in national reconciliation efforts?

Studies of the role of new social media in democratic transitions still remain in a relatively early stage (Vinck 2019), and they are even less developed in studies of the Middle East and North Africa. Between 2011 and 2013, almost every major media journal published a special issue on the role of social media in the Arab Spring. Much of that literature, which germinated at incredible speed in the aftermath of the uprisings, centered on questions of causation (Did new social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—*cause* the Arab Spring?),<sup>5</sup> the challenge

to authoritarianism (Do these platforms empower networks of collective action and protest [Eltantawy and Wiest 2011; Howard and Hussain 2013; Shirky 2009] or do they enhance authoritarian surveillance and stifle dissent [Hassanpour 2014; Morozov 2012]?), and their role in social movements (*How do social media platforms affect social movements?*). Yet the topic of social media's *mediation* role in democratic transitions has received little attention.

Meanwhile, outside political science democratization studies, in anthropology, sociology, and behavioral psychology, perhaps the feature of social media platforms most analyzed is how the communities they create are imagined, virtual, and parallel—but not part of the real world. Many of the early studies of new social media grappled with the distinction between the real world and the alternative lives people build on these platforms (e.g., Boellstorff 2008; Malaby 2011; Turkle 1997, 1984). Of particular concern has been the question of whether online relationships are “real,” and whether by turning to social media, we are disconnecting ourselves from actual social relationships. One line of inquiry, for instance, measures the “realness” of these relationships in a count of how many of them “migrate” into in-person relationships. While the particularly influential article by Robert Kraut and colleagues (1998) originally confirmed fears of social media's potentially detrimental effects on users' social and psychological well-being, a more recent wave of studies has challenged this view and endeavored to show the different ways these platforms can supplement and grow users' “actual” social lives—but in both waves, the real/virtual binary still dominates the axis of analysis.

This study puts the above two, otherwise distinct debates in conversation by scrutinizing social media platforms' mediation role—that is, their particular mode of content circulation—which I argue is one of their less analyzed yet potentially more detrimental features for political collectives. On the one hand, in a region where authoritarianism endures and basic access to information and freedom of expression remain incomplete projects, the question of dissemination in social media studies continues to take precedence and the politics of mediation remains secondary, unanalyzed. Speech is subsumed under information-communication technology (ICT) and mainly studied through frameworks of freedom of expression, access to information, and dissemination networks—where it is not so much analyzed as tallied. I find that this focus has inadvertently precluded the exploration of *the full role* of social media platforms in democratization and transitional justice efforts, and this study of their mediation role constitutes a step in that direction.

On the other hand, I depart from studies of the impact of social media platforms on personal relationships that are framed through the imagined/real binary,

and I take seriously the imagination as an important realm in which political collectives are forged and examine these platforms' corrosive effect on it. Most of these studies reference [Benedict Anderson's \(1983\)](#) "imagined" communities simply to highlight their difference from "real" ones (e.g., [Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011](#)). Instead, I understand Anderson's imagination as the active site where the relationship between the individual and the collective is cultivated. And while references to Anderson have reached a degree that one could call "promiscuous" ([Crapanzano 2004](#), 212n4),<sup>6</sup> I find him particularly relevant for a study of the politics of new social media because he foregrounds the medium (print matter) in his analysis of the role of the imagination in forging political collectives. Specifically, he shows how the expanded scope of print matter's circulation had a direct impact on the imagination's role in shaping political collectives. Therefore, drawing on Anderson's triadic analytic framework, I ask: How does the rise of new social media—changing the production, circulation, and consumption of online content—impact the role of the imagination in cohering the political collective?

In brief, in a departure from studies that explore social media platforms mainly through an opposition between the real and the imagined, and from studies that have focused almost exclusively on dissemination, I argue that one of new social media platforms' defining and yet less analyzed features is their mode of content circulation. And while [Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma \(2002\)](#) have well established the importance of circulation to social analysis, anthropologists continue to "take discourse 'circulation' for granted, as a mechanical process that merely transmits meanings, denying it the sense of cultural and performative significance attributed to discourse 'production'" ([Briggs 2007](#), 343–44). Therefore, I draw on anthropologists of publics who have compellingly established that "the very capacity of publics to know themselves and act in the world is premised, not on the instrumental use of communication to represent that which is already there, but rather on recursive processes of mass mediation and self-abstraction" ([Cody 2011](#), 47). Finding it useful to think social media through the lens of "infrastructure" ([Kornberger et al. 2019](#)), I also draw on studies of social media algorithms grappling with the political consequences of these new forms of mediation. And building on Anderson, who underscored the productive function of the imagination in welding political collectives, I explore how new social media's mode of content circulation has potentially corrosive effects on the realm of the imagined and the kinds of imagined publics it mediates—a change that I argue has serious consequences for the role of testimonies of violence in forging empathetic publics and fostering national reconciliation.



## THE RISE OF FACEBOOK IN POST-UPRISING TUNISIA

Just as TV became the primary medium for civic communication in the 1960s, social media is becoming this in the 21st century.

—Mark Zuckerberg, “Building Global Community,”  
Facebook, February 16, 2017

Facebook rose to popularity in Tunisia through its critical role in the 2011 uprising and has since only further consolidated its position at the center of the political scene. Particularly in a country where official news outlets such as traditional journalism and television had been controlled by the state for decades and perceived as its distrusted arms, Facebook and Twitter originally emerged as critical alternatives for the dissemination of information. When Ben Ali censored activists’ blogs in 2008, they relocated to Facebook and used their Facebook walls as new blogs (Kahlaoui 2013). In 2009, Facebook became available in Arabic, thereby expanding its reach in the region. During the 2011 uprising, as official channels ignored the unrest, Tunisians turned to Facebook as the only site providing live, minute-by-minute updates of what was happening per neighborhood (Madrigrail 2011). Within two weeks, in the pivotal days between January 5 and January 17, the number of Facebook users in Tunisia increased by 8 percent (Mourtada and Salem 2011). Since then, as the number of individuals with internet access has continued to steadily rise, the number of Facebook users continues to rise along with it (IWS 2020).

But if Facebook’s pivotal function during the 2011 uprising was the dissemination of information, in the post-uprising context, political organizers turned Facebook into a public sphere for building networks, advocacy, launching protests, raising awareness about controversial state bills, campaigning, and heated political debate. Most victim groups did not have an independent website or blog, and their only official online presence was a Facebook page. Victims unlikely to be interviewed or featured in official news reporting used Facebook to participate in evaluating the work of the TDC and shaping public opinion around it. After an interview with a political organizer involved in the TDC process, I would ask them for the documents they had referenced during the meeting. They would frequently respond: “Just go to my Facebook page, my entire archive is there.” As I conducted research among people active in the TDC process, most introductions, files shared, and messages were sent via Facebook. Even exchanges organizing a social outing were more likely to occur via Facebook messages than phone calls or texts.

While only one-third of the population had internet access in 2010 (ITU 2019), and only half of those had active Facebook accounts, the reach of Facebook must be understood not by a count of individual accounts but as situated within the broader social networks these users inhabit. Traditional news media, particularly the Qatari-based Al Jazeera TV network, reporting Facebook-uploaded shaky videos shot with camera phones helped expand the viewership of Facebook content beyond the number of its registered users (Zayani 2015). During my field research, I would often learn about a controversial Facebook statement not through Facebook, but indirectly when a victim, a TDC staff member, or a civil society organizer brought it up. These statements would be treated as a major development in the TDC proceedings, often referenced in later conversations and interviews. Even though many victims had no Facebook accounts, internet, computers, or smartphones, they were always fully updated on the latest Facebook controversy or comment of the week. Many received updates indirectly through their social networks by word of mouth. In brief, if there was Facebook news, everybody heard about it—internet access or not.

Facebook's alleged role in the 2011 uprising and its popularity in post-uprising Tunisia prompted similar questions about its role in the democratization process: How did Facebook impact the commission's efforts to publicize the truth, grant victims voice, and promote national reconciliation? The answer started emerging clearly for me as I began to compare my experience attending the public hearings in person and my experience viewing them on Facebook. The critical point of difference I want to highlight is the relation between the individual viewer and other members of the audience, the collective whose members these hearings are meant to help reconcile.

On Facebook, the audience could comment on and discuss the testimony in real time. In the hall, my best impression of the audience's reaction to the testimony was based on whichever faces the camerapeople chose to focus on and project onto the two live screens flanking the stage. They tended to zoom in on faces of high-ranking public figures or faces showing strong emotion. In comparison, Facebook's live-streaming format allows for hundreds of viewers' comments to appear during the hearing in real time. Even if you watch the recorded video at a later time, not as it live-streams, the comments get recorded as part of the video, appearing in the real time in which they were posted during the hearing. The comments proceed like a conversation. Someone posts a first comment, such as "this pool of liars," to which another person responds. A fight will ensue, commenters will trade insults, eventually the conversation will die down. A few

minutes later a new comment will be posted, which might be commented on, or might just float there on its own until a more polemical comment is posted triggering another thread of responses, and so on. This type of audience engagement with the testimonies in real time differed markedly from attending the public hearing in person, where the audience was expected to be silent.

The second difference was my impression of other audience members' reactions. My impression involved a lot more speculation in person than it does on Facebook. Live, my impression of the other audience members' response proved mostly speculative. I was reading the faces of people many of whom I did not know personally. Often facial expressions and body language can be strong enough to prove definitive in what they communicate, but there were still gaps that my own mind had to fill. On Facebook, audience members express their opinions plainly, leaving no room for speculation and with little reason to censor themselves. The Facebook format also frees people to make comments and opinions that would be inappropriate and thus likely left unspoken in more socially inhibited live interactions.

The third difference is that Facebook facilitates an encounter with a much greater and more diverse pool of commenters. On Facebook, the impression I was getting in terms of the hearing's public reception multiplied from the few hundred people in the room to thousands of Facebook users. As mentioned earlier, the people in attendance at the public hearing hailed from select, invited organizations. On Facebook, the audience expands to include a much broader segment of the population in terms of age, gender, class, occupation, and political affiliation. And thus, as a viewer, I am forced to encounter a much more diverse pool of commenters. As an important consequence, the Facebook live-stream attracted and enabled conversations *across* different political parties. In the public hearing hall, only persons who knew each other shook hands and chatted with each other, the interactions rarely breaking from political party lines.

### **SAMI BRAHEM: The Circulation of a Testimony**

Of all twelve testimonies narrated in the TDC's first two back-to-back public hearings, that of the former Islamist political prisoner Sami Brahem drew particular attention—locally and internationally. Like the other witnesses, Brahem narrated the persecution he had suffered at the hands of the former regime. But beyond the content of the testimony, I want to reproduce the circulation of Brahem's testimony on social media platforms.

Brahem gave the testimony in a TDC-selected venue in northern Tunis to a live audience of around 350 people. It was broadcast in its entirety on national TV channels. In parallel, it was also live-streamed on the commission's Facebook channel, and afterwards the TDC's media office made it available on YouTube. People started sharing and re-sharing the YouTube video on their Facebook pages. A few days later, shorter video excerpts, ranging from three to six minutes in length, started circulating in greater frequency. The complete testimony is an hour long. The shorter excerpts were circulated as "highlights"—the most defining moments according to those who cut and reposted them—and those became the more widely circulating parts of the testimony. While the full testimony contained Brahem's name and the date of the hearing, the shorter excerpts instead had titles indicating specific themes.

As the testimony fragmented into shorter excerpts, each fragment started assembling a life of its own, slowly disconnecting from the other parts of the testimony into a distinct "echo chamber" (Pariser 2011) with a progressively more tenuous relation to the original testimony. One flurry of Facebook activity was fascinated with Brahem's working-class background. A group moved to revisit Brahem's earlier positions and publications in light of this information. A Jordanian journalist who had previously had an intellectual dispute with Brahem over interpretations of Islamic texts and political Islam—in which he denounced him as a "liberal intellectual in his high ivory tower"—wrote a high-praise, compassionate article re-reading Brahem's intellectual position in light of learning that he comes from a working-class background. Another group of viewers used news of his background as an opportunity to draw attention to the public disdain for common-law prisoners in comparison to the social status enjoyed by political prisoners. Tens of young men managed to get their hands on Brahem's phone number and called to ask him, "Where are you right this minute? My mother wants to hug you. I can come pick you up right now." Mothers of common-law inmates wanted to host him in their homes to express their gratitude for his words during the testimony in recognition of people from working-class backgrounds and support for common-law prisoners.

Elsewhere on Facebook, Brahem's testimony was swallowed into a pre-existing, already in-circulation anti-reparations campaign excoriating former Islamist prisoners for opportunistically "marketing their suffering for financial gain" (Sheet 2023). Images of Brahem's face started circulating with a hand demanding money plastered over it—the image that came to symbolize the satirical anti-reparations campaign "How Much Is a Kilo of Suffering?" Within this virtual chamber, Brahem's testimony became further evidence of Islamists' moral depravity. Another

storm of Facebook activity was busy foregrounding a different fragment from Brahem's testimony to launch a public debate about the need to recognize male victims of sexual violence. This virtual chamber included both, invitations to talk shows and an abundance of crass jokes. Meanwhile, a group of compassionate viewers were inspired to act as Brahem's saviors. He was offered monetary donations to support his meager teaching income. A Tunisian national residing in Europe offered to cover Brahem's expenses to pursue postgraduate studies at a "Western university." A Qatari prince wrote him a check. Human rights organizations showered him with offers of employment.

After giving his public testimony on November 17, 2016, Brahem changed his phone number three times and did not leave his house for a month. Brahem had agreed to participate in the TDC's public hearings because he thought of it as his "national duty." As an academic and former Islamist prisoner who had suffered unimaginable torture, he believed that "uncovering the truth" was important for the country's transition toward a more democratic society. What he did not expect was the aftermath. After his testimony, Brahem started receiving thousands of Facebook messages from strangers. *Thousands*. And once they started pouring in, it was not clear that they were ever going to stop. "Tonight, we went to sleep crying" (*el-leila hāthiyya betna nebki*) was one repeating message. In those first days, he tried responding to the messages. But after it became obvious that the influx was not slowing down, he stopped. When I asked him to tell me about his experience of the "aftermath of the public testimony," he responded in Facebook currency. He said: "It was three major [Facebook] posts." The first one, titled "I am not an icon" (*'anā lastu 'ayqūna*), and the second one, titled "Have mercy" (*'erhamūni*), were both addressing the Tunisian public beseeching them to stop contacting him. Local newspapers widely published the second post:

Have mercy,

Since the day of the testimony the phone has been ringing nonstop from sunrise until a very late hour of the night. It doesn't stop for a second—TV stations, radio stations, journalists, local and international, [contacting me] for a statement or to attend a show—they suddenly discovered that a person was tortured despite the hundreds of human rights reports, and documented testimonies (some of what I mentioned in my testimony I had written before and is published).

First, I would like to inform them all that those who gave testimonies have made a moral commitment to the commission not to give any statements for a month from the day of the testimony.

Second, I would like to inform them that my testimony that I presented within the transitional justice framework was a duty (*wājeb*) that was completed (*waqʿa taʿdiyatahu*) and is now over and I am not willing to reopen wounds and circulate them from one channel to the other.

Third, I would like to inform them that there are prisoners who were tortured much more than I was, but maybe they don't have the same eloquence of expression that I have, those have a greater priority for their torture to be made known and they are not far [to reach], some of them are still protesting in front of the parliament building.

Fourth, I will not stand again in the testifying position except in the course of whatever the Truth and Dignity Commission decides within the transitional justice framework . . .

Fifth, my testimony is available for the public and it is the property of the public and I have written previous testimonies that are published but I/my person is not material for media profiteering.

I used to live quietly far from any lights and noise, and then my life was turned upside down, I will not permit myself to profiteer from this testimony to achieve stardom or heroism or popularity or fame that I don't need or to be material to jack up viewer ratings.

As for the Tunisian people who engulfed me with feelings of love and appreciation through their hundreds of messages, I only have love and appreciation [for them], and I will make sure to respond to every single message, no matter how much time it takes.

—Sami Brahem, November 19, 2016<sup>7</sup>

### CIRCULATION, IMAGINATION, AND RECONCILIATION

So how has the circulation of Brahem's testimony on Facebook changed its potential role in cultivating national empathy and reconciliation? What does this tell us about the impact of social media platforms on the value of "speaking" in democratic efforts, and the role of the imagination in reconciling political collectives? And how are these platforms' new modes of circulation changing imagined publics and mediating the encounters among them?

The first change that social media platforms bring to the role of testimonies of violence in cohering an imagined collective is that while in Anderson's study narratives were only passively consumed, now the audience responds and a back-and-forth ensues—new social media platforms have changed the formerly silent relationship between text and audience. Per his description, the aftermath of Brahem's testimony unfolded as a sequence of misrecognitions, or an encounter with an Other that makes the witness and the audience more foreign to each other than they were before the encounter. In our conversations and in his public statements, Brahem highlighted the “strangeness” and “alien-ness” of some of the responses he received. As Brahem listed the responses for me, he kept exclaiming: “Who are these people?!” He did not feel comforted or supported by these messages; he felt alienated. He described every message, including for instance the Qatari check, as the most unrelated, alien reaction possible to his testimony. He could not understand the responses: “How could this be the response to what I shared?”

I am suggesting that an important condition that allowed narratives of violence to engender imagined empathy for a universal community is the impossibility of an interaction between author and reader—a distance that social media has obliterated. In her analysis of communication on social media platforms, Rosalind Morris argues that “social media enables communication without relation, or connection without mediation” (2013, 106), that it is “a kind of speech that fails to communicate” (2017, S123). She writes: “The idea of communicability now hides within all media by virtue of a systematic misrecognition. Connection has come to stand for communication. . . . And presencing—the appearance as one who can be seen to speak—offers itself in lieu of representation” (2013, 109). In other words, while social media platforms have increased *the amount* of communication exchanges, an exchange of words is not always conducive to increased communication, connection, or empathy. And perhaps one of the consequences of streaming testimonies of violence on Facebook is that they are now relegated to another social media instance of “communication without relation” or, worse, communication that breeds alienation and limits the possibility of reconciliation.

The second, related change that social media brings to a potential imagined community is that people's individual imaginaries are now spelled out in more detail, and laid out one next to the other, erasing much of the space for an imagined likeness and showing the starkness of the difference in what is imagined. While TV also created “split publics” (Rajagopal 2001) with radically different imaginings of their nation, Facebook forces these publics to meet. The historian Lynn Hunt (2007) has argued that reading accounts of torture generated an “imagined

empathy” for strangers and constituted the foundation of human rights. An important but unanalyzed condition that enabled process, I suggest, is a lack of communication between the author, the subject of the narrative, and the reader. Similarly, truth commissions’ public testimonies of violence were formerly listened to mostly in silence; the role of the audience in a confession is often minimal. As these testimonies are now live-streamed on Facebook, the witness is forced to receive a torrent of replies from complete strangers in a way that changes the role of these hearings in democratization processes. Brahem never thought of the testimony as an exchange; he had neither anticipated nor desired any responses. Instead of fostering a feeling of collective identification, this exchange only collapsed the imaginary of likeness.

The third, related change that social media platforms bring to the role of testimonies of violence in creating an imagined collective is the relation among its public/audience members. Building on Charles Taylor’s notion of a “social imaginary,” Michael Warner (2002, 2005) argues that the public that emerges as the collective of readers of a circulating text constitutes a particular type of public,<sup>8</sup> one of its defining features being that “it exists *by virtue of being addressed*” (Warner 2002, 50; emphasis in original). Whether the text is written, visual, or auditory, claims Warner, its public is brought into existence through a discursive process: it is the only type of public where people in completely different places, picking up texts at different times, to consume them in different contexts, are connected by nothing other than being the addressee of that text. It is a public “by which an addressable object [the audience] is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence” (Warner 2002, 51).

Warner (2002, 63) understands this public as “a kind of reflexivity” modeled along a social relation between author and reader. He calls the social relation among the members of this public a “stranger-relationality”: “they are no longer merely people-whom-one-does-not-yet-know; rather, it can be said that an environment of strangerhood is the necessary premise of some of our most prized ways of being. . . . This constitutive and normative environment of strangerhood . . . requires our constant imagining” (Warner 2002, 57). He describes this imagined form of sociality as follows:

The experience of social reality at this level of modernity feels quite unlike that of contexts organized by kinship, hereditary status, local affiliation, mediated political access, parochial nativity, or ritual. In those settings, one’s place in the common order is what it is regardless of one’s inner thoughts,



however intense their affective charge might sometimes be. The appellative energy of publics puts a different burden on us: it makes us believe our consciousness to be decisive. The direction of our glance can constitute our social world. (Warner 2002, 62)

Building on Warner's argument that our inner, individual consciousness plays a "decisive" role in generating the imagined public, I suggest that one of the potentially detrimental effects of social media platforms is that they displace readers' inner, individual consciousness as the primary reference informing their reception of these texts, thereby overriding the source that coheres the imagined, collective community. As audience members viewed Brahem's testimony, a multitude of themes could catch the viewer's "glance" or inner, individual consciousness and come to be the basis of their unique, imaginative connection to Brahem: the well-known working-class neighborhood he is from, his grief for his mother whose funeral he could not attend, being a poor academic, his fear that he may be unable to conceive children as a consequence of the targeted torture he suffered. It could be a body gesture, the particular way he resists crying, his temperament—the potential points of imagined association for the audience are infinite.

But due to the mode of circulation of texts on social media platforms, the comments seemed to confine the meaning of a testimony to the preexisting fault lines that had defined the political landscape before the hearings, thereby overriding the role of the imagination in potentially transcending them. When a testimony starts circulating, these platforms typically invite comments like the ones listed above. These comments start circulating along with the testimony, in effect becoming part of it. Pretty quickly, these comments seemed to narrow viewers' otherwise endless associations of how the testimony could be read to the specific themes and controversies most loudly brought up in the comments section. By receiving the testimony already framed in the comments as a battleground between Islamist supporters and secular skeptics, viewers read the text as limited to that dichotomy. And as the testimony circulated further, their responses grew increasingly confined to a question of where they stood on that divide.

In other words, this mode of circulation and audience reception of witness testimonies demonstrated a regression into preexisting "knowledge"—hardened opinions and positions about other members of that collective—instead of opening up new ways of knowing fellow members of that public. Per the comments that accumulated under each testimony, the result was reinforcing historical divisions along Islam/secularism, reparations/anti-reparations, coastal cities versus

marginalized interior regions that had historically defined the political landscape. Contrary to a popular perception that social media platforms constitute the site of generation of new, unlikely collectives, I found that these platforms can too quickly give primacy and algorithm-driven power to preexisting fault lines. Put differently, this mode of circulation of testimonies seemed to displace readers' inner, individual consciousness as the main reference that informs their reception of texts, and overshadowed it with the social currents, hashtags, and overdetermined controversies that were loudest in the comments at the time of circulation.

In brief, as new forms of mediation now enable audience response to content formerly consumed in silence, force a back-and-forth across a formerly silent relation between author and reader, increase *the amount* of communication produced, expose the stark differences between formerly more insulated imagined publics, and erode the "environment of strangerhood" that enabled their harmonious co-existence, imagined publics are changing, with unprecedented encounters among them unfolding. The question is, how are social media platforms mediating *the encounters* among these imagined publics?

### SOCIAL MEDIA'S WAR ON SILENCE AND THE PRODUCTION OF CERTAINTY

If reconciliation was a doubtful outcome of in-person public hearings, then live-streaming them on social media platforms is not the awaited solution. And while the internet and its information-dissemination platforms are often hailed as "the antidote to authoritarianism" (Devich-Cyril 2017), it does not necessarily make them the antidote to reconciled publics. As we continue to grasp the full range of changes brought to imagined collectives by social media, one of them—certainty—constitutes a feature of these emerging publics that I believe detrimental to truth commissions' reconciliation efforts.

I am foregrounding one of the less-discussed characteristics of the growth-driven algorithm that governs the circulation of social media content: its war on silence. An algorithm is a computational system that identifies, ranks, and selects content that a user will most likely engage with—that is, content most likely to generate more content (by liking, commenting, sharing, etc.)—and presents it as their "feed."<sup>9</sup> Studies of new social media algorithms have centered on the data scientists designing them (Kelty 2005; Coleman and Golub 2008; Lowrie 2017, 2018; Seaver 2018), and many have raised concerns about the ethics of these data-centric technologies (Zigon 2019), the ontological assumptions on which their sieve-like filters are modeled (Kockelman 2013), the "myth of the neutral platform" and the

politics of their content moderation (Gillespie 2018), the policing and surveillance they enable (Joh 2016; Gates 2011; Franz 2017), the recommender “traps” that suggest content to users for the purpose of “hooking them” (Seaver 2019a), the “disinformation machine” that they can constitute (Vaidhyanathan 2018), and “heteromation,” or the unpaid human labor from which these algorithms create profit (Ekbia and Nardi 2017). Jodi Dean (2002, 2005) calls this algorithmic drive for growth social media’s “neoliberal fantasy” of abundance, because it is modeled, she argues, along a capitalist mode of production and accumulation and therefore cannot serve as a medium of left politics.

While studies of these algorithms’ political consequences have focused on the “filter bubbles” (Pariser 2011) that they create and designated them the main feature driving political polarization, I am bringing attention not to the content but to *its quantity and the ceaselessness of its dispensation*, what I am calling social media’s war on silence. We are familiar with silence as an individual right in the example of *Miranda v. Arizona* (1996) in the United States—or the right of a person under arrest to remain silent. But I do not mean silence as an act of resistance (Johnson 2011) in a “refusal to represent certain violations” (Das 2003, 304), a form of tacit, lived memory of the past (Kidron 2009), a cultural practice of remembrance and commemoration (Ben-Ze’ev, Ginio, and Winter 2010), “strategic silence” instilled to suspend conflict and give clashing parties time to calm down (Winter 2010, 5), or silence as a form of respect and “the only way we can honour the ineffability and privacy of certain experiences” (Jackson 2004, 56).

I mean silence as a *halting* gap in knowledge. Silences, as gaps of information, give pause. These pauses—the unknowability, uncertainty, the impossibility of a “complete” knowability of an Other—are undervalued elements in what keeps a certain openness of one person to another. And perhaps one of social media algorithms’ unrecognized dangers is their concentrated efforts to create a fantasy of certainty and a sufficiency of information, while relentlessly concealing the gaps in the supposed knowledge they present with a stream of more information. This mode of circulating content makes us confuse the quantity of information on the page with a sufficiency of information to make a definitive determination about our relationship to others.

Silence—by which I mean a pause in content—during which users don’t produce content, just take it in, imagine, ponder, think, wonder, dwell in an acknowledged gap of incomplete information, proves antithetical to these platforms and precipitates their demise—and thus must be fought with algorithms that drive more content at all costs. This is what I am calling social media’s war on silence.

And one of the consequences of this algorithm-driven war is less reconciled, more agitated, more “militantly certain publics.” While certainty may be a useful precondition for realizing a range of political purposes, I find it detrimental to national reconciliation.

### ABSTRACT

*At first glance, there seems to be a shared mission between social media’s promise of increased dissemination of information and truth commissions’ commitment to truth, granting victims a voice, and safeguarding people’s right to information—which would suggest that the rise of the former could only empower the latter. This study suggests otherwise. I argue that social media can impede truth commissions’ liberal vision that celebrates “speaking” as synonymous with “healing” and hails publicizing victims’ testimonies as key to facilitating national reconciliation. Through a study of the Tunisian Truth and Dignity Commission’s Facebook-mediated public hearings, I analyze these platforms’ algorithmic mode of content circulation and argue that one of its less analyzed features is its “war on silence.” While “voice” has been celebrated and silence decried in human rights discourse, I analyze silence as a “gap in knowledge” and argue for its role in forging empathetic publics and mediating reconciliation. [truth commissions; public testimonies; social media; algorithms; war on silence; imagined publics; national reconciliation]*

### NOTES

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1. This article draws on a broader research project that examines the politics of the Tunisian Truth and Dignity Commission (TDC) inaugurated in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2014 to investigate the human rights abuses of the ousted regime, recommend institutional reforms, and propose a reparations program for the victims. I spent a total of twelve months in Tunisia between 2014 and 2018, where I attended the commission’s public hearings, national consultations, awareness seminars, and conducted extensive interviews with commission members, their staff, civil society activists, and the different victim groups involved.
2. All translations from Arabic are my own unless otherwise noted.
3. The commission had to find another venue, however, to host consequent hearings. In tactics eerily reminiscent of the former regime, the commission was exorbitantly overcharged for its use of the venue and later told by its management that it could no longer host its hearings there because of “technical difficulties”: water leaks, electrical wiring problems, etc. These are strategies typically used by the former regime to interfere with and obstruct the meetings and organizing efforts of non-governmental organizations or oppositional political groups.
4. For a history of the long-standing Islamist/secular divide in Tunisia, see [Perkins 2014](#).

5. Miriyam Aouragh (2015) observes that by prioritizing the role of new social media in the analysis of the Arab uprisings we find an echo of a historical and persisting approach to Arab societies as lacking in agency, and that these uprisings were not produced by Arabs but by the tools of Western democracies—it suggests that Arabs are helpless without Western intervention. I think Aouragh’s astute point makes inquiries into the role of social media in democratization efforts in the region all the more important: inquiries that analyze social media not in terms of the national origins of the platforms but in terms of the unpredictable circulation patterns of their content that seem to always exceed and challenge the intent of the developers. For a discussion of the hierarchy in social media studies between the “developed” and “developing” world more generally, see Daniel Miller (2011, 157–215).
6. Of the many critiques of Anderson, a good place to start is Partha Chatterjee’s (1991) “Whose Imagined Community?” The thrust of the critique is that Anderson over-determines the cultural aspect and fails to address the unequal distribution of power involved. For a critique of his approach to language, a better place to start is Michael Silverstein’s (2000) “Whorfianism and the Linguistic Imagination of Nationality.” For a more recent retrospective of the life of this publication and a critique of how it has been read primarily through discourse analysis while forgetting Anderson’s Marxist bent, see Goswami 2020.
7. This is a translation from the original in Arabic. Punctuation has been changed and some phrases added in brackets for clarity.
8. Michael Warner (2002) distinguishes three types of publics: any polity (e.g., citizens of a state); a concrete audience in a shared physical space (e.g., theater audience); and a public of readers that emerges through the circulation of texts. He focuses on the third type.
9. For a discussion of debates in critical algorithm studies about how to best define *algorithms*, see Nick Seaver (2017, 2019b).

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