

Med Limam

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Dr. Mohamed Limam

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The limited impact of the digital revolution on political science teaching and research in Tunisia

Introduction

This paper aims at shedding light on the limited impact of the digital revolution on political science teaching and research in Tunisia. It assumes that the digital revolution has a long way to run before changing minds and attitudes of political scientists. The underuse of digital tools in political science teaching and research is critical. We attribute this critical situation to various factors. First, we consider that policy makers show a little interest to promote political science. They do not demonstrate that they are investing on the nexus between digitalization and Political science discipline. On the contrary, Political Science has been marginalized since decades. The lack of equipment and technical support testify this marginalization. In a nutshell, there is no real political will to address the issue. Second, regional disparities and poverty leads to develop the lack of interest of students from less favored regions. Money shortage and regional discrimination impede them benefitting from digitalization advantages. Third, resistance to change represents another factor that contribute to slow down the path of digitalization. Professors who are not comfortable with the new technologies of communication exert a negative influence on young researchers. They exploit the deficit of equipment as an argument to avoid capacity building and training programs. They serve by doing so as a bad example for young researchers. Their hostility toward the use of new techniques based on digitalization discourage researchers and young teachers to go onward. However, the resistance to change is not a fatality. In the specific case of Tunisia, Facebook paved the way to the

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training and building capacity of reluctant researchers. The dynamic of exchange information, debates and analyses lead to a greater use of Facebook. In fine, Facebook became the first interactive platforms for political scientist.

Absence of interest to promote political science

Universities and research institutions do not facilitate the introduction of digitalization's tools. They do not manage effort or mobilize resources, whether from public or private donors, to develop the digital dimension in relation with political science teaching and research. Institutions do not provide teachers with working spaces dedicated to digital interaction. Digital equipment and tools that would facilitate videoconference and exchange with international community are very limited in number. And when they do exist, most of the time we notice that either the personal is not up to date to ensure technical support or the equipment is out service. The concept of help desk is simply inexistent.

Still, for the time being, a large number of institutions hosting political science department have no WI FI. And when they have it, most of the time it is out of service or at the best it covers the management offices area only. Furthermore, academic institutions did not invest in subscribing to electronic journals or to platforms such as Science direct or J-Store, etc. It remains available only open access platforms. These platforms do not provide access to the recent and relevant journals and publications of political science. Research and teaching political science still depends largely on printed publication.

In addition to the shortage of equipment, we noticed a notable difference in material resources between students from Sousse University and students from Jendouba University. Cities of Sousse and Jendouba represent a concrete case of the regional gap that exists in Tunisia between the costal region and the hinterlands. Sousse is a famous and wealthy city. Jendouba is reputed to be one of the most marginalized and poorest cities in Tunisia! This gap impacts attitudes and behavior of students. Whereas students in public law and political science master from Jendouba University resisted using Dropbox, those from Sousse University have adhered to the exercise of working via Drop box. Actually, limited financial resources are one key factor to explain the difference between students from Sousse and Jendouba. Indeed, Students from Jendouba University belongs to families with very low incomes. The majority of them simply cannot afford to buy a computer. They cannot exploit the equipment

available at the college of law since the computing room at the college has a very small capacity in term of computers and working spaces. In the same vein, the poor coverage of Internet network aggravates the situation and demotivates the students from Jendouba University. The combination of the factors mentioned above leads students of Jendouba to develop a negative perception of themselves. Indeed, the perception of Jendouba region of being an excluded region as well as a marginalized population accentuates the lack of motivation. Last but not least, the exclusion of Jendouba elite from high position in the different state departments, in a flagrant opposition to the privileged Elite from Sousse in particular, impacts seriously the involvement of the student from Jendouba region and push them to loose interest in politics and political science all together.

For the time being, there is no concrete strategy to address the issue or to promote political science research and teaching in connection with digital revolution. For instance, the public Virtual University of Tunis proposes two courses on political science¹. The first one deals with management of organization, and the second one is about Geopolitics. Not only the number of courses proposed is farcical, but also the tutor of the Geopolitics' course has no academic qualification, other than the nexus with the ancient regime of Ben Ali.

As a matter of fact, Tunisian political instances are not willing to promote political science as an autonomous and flourished discipline with a high nexus to digital technologies. Under autocratic regimes, they always showed mistrust and fear of political science. This attitude did not change after 2011 revolution and political science remains marginalized in comparison with public law discipline. The only department of political science that provided a major in political science was at the Faculté de droit et des sciences politiques de Tunis. After a decade (1993-2003), the major of political science was removed. Only a master degree in political science remained in place. In the whole country, the teaching of Political science is reduced to a Master degree within three colleges of law.

However and despite the adversity against political science, there are attempts to improve the status of political science. First, private universities recently started to show interest in teaching political science by introducing a master degree in political science. Even better, *Science Po Tunisie*, a private university, proposes a major in

¹ <http://rel.uvt.rnu.tn/>

political science. It also provides remarkable equipment that would allow a better connection between teaching political science and digital revolution.

Second, there are individual initiatives within the public university to promote political science teachings. Actually, two Professors are “fighting” for establishing a political science institute. But fighting in order to promote political science does not mean necessarily fighting in order to strengthen the use of digital technologies and to reinforce the nexus of political science with digital tools!

Facebook and the wind of change:

Certainly the nexus between political science and digital technologies is dramatically weak in Tunisia. Specifically, the old generation of professors of political science has resisted and still resists embracing the new technologies of information and communication. Even better, they exploit their hegemonic position to slow down the use of digital tools in political science research. Nevertheless, the 2011 upheaval marked a growing use of Facebook to the extent that some tests qualified the Tunisian revolution as Facebook revolution². Facebook succeeded in bringing new trends to the relationship between political scientist community and digital tools. Students and teachers of political science benefited from the daily use of Facebook to improve their digital skills. In turn, they succeeded to partially transform Facebook to an academic arena.

The hegemony of “Oligarchs”

The majority of Professors and heads of Public law and political science department have limited digital skills. Consequently they are not enthusiastic to introduce programs on digitization and political science. With very few exceptions, young teachers carry in the topic within chapters related to political communication.

But, the limited digital skills of “old-fashioned” professors impacts negatively colleagues who want to profit from the advantages of digitalization. For instance, the use of video extract or an audio record during a course or a presentation provokes reservations and hostile attitudes from “oligarchs”. Not to mention their systematic refusal to organize videoconference. Hence, no e-learning programs are set up. Of course, the main argument they advance is about the defect of equipment. So, instead of maintaining pressure and pushing ahead towards reinforcement of equipment, they

²https://www.academia.edu/1266298/The_Contribution_of_Facebook_to_the_2011_Tunisian_Revolution_A_Cyberpsychological_Insight_2012_Cyberpsychology_Behavior_and_Social_Networking

prefer not to opt for the use of digital tools. We can concede that equipment is most of the time inoperative. However, we assume that this (accurate) argument is exploited as a pretext to hide their inability to move onward and upward.

Actually, the attitude of political science oligarchs influences negatively the attitude of young researchers and teachers. The large majority of teachers and students have never heard about “Drop Box”, to mention only this example. The communication and interaction with students and between colleagues still rely, in large measure, on traditional tools. Communication and working after class time is a serious problem. A large number of students and teachers do not use emails. When they create email accounts, it is only in the purpose of creating a Facebook account. Based on the author experience, efforts made with students in Master degree of political science to work with Drop Box gave limited results. A Tunisian NGO had organized in 2013 a two days training session on ZOTERO, with symbolic fees of 30 €. Only 20 teachers from different disciplines attended the session. But none of the political scientists or student from political science attended the training session. This example indicates that researchers and teaching staff are themselves reluctant to upgrade their skills related to digital revolution!

Vive Facebook!

As mentioned above, Facebook and smartphones played an important role during the upheaval in Tunisia. The interest in sharing information, videos, political positions via Facebook went growing. The period following the political revolution of 2011 was marked by the transformation of Facebook into an interactive space for political scientists and experts. Facebook has facilitated and accelerated the share of scientific analysis. Academicians, researchers and political commentators became addict to Facebook. Facebook became in very little time the main, if not the exclusive digital platform for jurists and political scientists. Essays, tests, scientific events, call for papers, etc. are published on Facebook. Many specialized pages on legal and political analysis have been created. Facebook gave raise to passionate debates, discussions, comments and polemics as well. Some researchers, experts and political activists gained so much importance and notoriety in a matter of a few days. Ministries and higher public instances started to hire them as experts. The president of the republic used to consult them and hired some of them as counselors in his cabinet. Either

better, some of them succeeded to become a minister³. Having said that, comparing to Drop Box and Google+, Facebook remains by far the only digital sphere where Tunisian political scientists meet virtually and exchange analysis. Many Facebook pages were created putting together students and their teachers. Students send their homework to their teachers and their colleagues via these Facebook pages. From a social media, Facebook is transformed to a scientific platform and either gave Tunisian researchers the opportunity to connect with the international community of political scientists.

Conclusion:

The overall objective of this paper is to focus on the lack and shortage in digital technologies that characterizes teaching and research of political science. The underuse of digital tools impedes Tunisian researchers, and students as well, from improving their teaching methods, sharing experience with political science international community. However, we assume that the gap identified above could be addressed if material resources and capacity building programs are settled up. Young political scientists, if mobilized and supported, are able to initiate and develop programs and curriculums based on digitalization. The lack of interest of policy makers in promoting the digitalization in relation with political science teaching could be surmounted by the helping hand of NGOs and donors. The dynamic created by and within Facebook demonstrates that the main challenge remains the lack of material resources and capacity building programs.

³ See the case of Slim Amamou, « Slim Amamou – From Digital Activist to State Secretary », https://ps.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Perspectives_02-14_Eva_Lehnen-Portrait-Slim_Amamou5.pdf