Speaker is Tarek Callaway. He is a professor in the departments of art history and history here at Rutgers. And he is going to speak about the Tunisian revolution and question mark of Facebook a Facebook revolution. Question mark. There is a word document that is not America. Yes. Oh hello everyone. Um so this is the first time I will be using the PowerPoint presentation to talk about what happened in Tunisia. I talked about what happened in Tunisia. Uh just like someone who thought that he participated in what happened. I will be trying now to make some sense out of it. And the reason for this the reason why I would like to make some sense of it that is to talk about it not simply as an insider but as an academic is because I have encountered so many misconceptions and misrepresentations of what happened. And in the front of the social media and its use in the Tunisian revolution I am sure that many of you did not hear much about the Tunisian revolution. The US media remember to talk about the Tunisian revolution only after the after the presence was was overthrown in January for 20 January 14th I remember in January 12:00 Ben Wedeman the CNN reporter sent me an email. This is January 12th two days before the fall of President Ben Ali the Tunisian president before he fled the country telling me that he sent this e-mail from Khartoum telling me that he was begging the CNN editors to send him to Tunis and they they were declining his his offer and they were not. Very hard about the idea of sending him to Tunisia and so many of you certainly did not hear about Tunisia. So I would like to make few notes about what happened. And. One of the reasons of them is of the misrepresentation is not only the absence of of the media but it's later also misrepresentation of what happened. So the talk will be about two things. First of all the relationship between what happened on the ground and what happened on the Internet. Basically there is a straightforward plot point I would like to make that it's these guys who made the revolution no one else. I was in New Jersey my friends were in Montreal other.
The others were in Paris few others were in Tunis but we were using only our computers. It's these guys who decided to break the wall of fear and trespass. One of the most important trend lines in the Tunisian society and go to the streets and face the bullets. And so it's it's that's the first point that because in some Western media we have heard about the Tunisian Twitter revolution the Tunisian Facebook people. So it's not certainly it's not it's with the revolution and it's not Facebook. So the whole issue is how much Facebook and secondly Twitter played a role in what happened. So that that will be one of the issues I will be discussing the second issue as what came to fruition. Facebook played how much was the involvement of people who are trained in the West in creating this in helping create this. There is a new york times article which was published in February 13th and it made a lot of buzz about what happened and the relationship of social media and the Tunisian revolution and the Egyptian revolution and its. Well let me put it bluntly it's it's an infuriate creating article it made me really and many of my friends very angry about this misrepresentation. So just to give you a sense of what what has been written about this they and he's talking now about people who are using the Internet they fuse their secular expertise and social networks with a discipline called from religious movements and combined the energy of soccer fans with the sophistication of surgeons breaking free from older veterans of Arab political opposition. They relied on tactics of line of nonviolent resistance channeled from an American scholar through a Serbian youth brigade but also on marketing tactics borrowed from Silicon Valley. You can't get something that is more fantasy than this. And I'm I'm so I'm not really observing from from far away. I'm someone who was inside what was happening in terms of the Internet at nothing of this has anything any relationship really really to reality. We don't know any Serbian and they're making score. Actually we we I don't. Many of my friends never heard of this American scholar and I'll I'll I'll get to his name afterwards. So it's about these two points and just to give you a sense of why the Internet is important and why the Internet played a role in what happened in Tunisia as to give you a background about the anti censorship movement because it's this movement of anti censorship that was able and successfully able to transform the internet especially Facebook
into a news platform. Why do we need the news platform. Well for two main reasons. First of all in Tunisia there is no independent journalism. All kind of journalism is either pro-government or anti government so journalism as well as a field as a practice. So it's there. There are people who are called journalists but in practice it's not fair. And we can go into details about that. And this was this situation for so many decades. So this is not new. And this is in the British media and in visual media and TV channels radio channels and all kinds of media. Secondly why do we need an alternative is because censorship especially in the Internet is a huge in Tunisia. So many of you may have heard about Iran China. While the Tunisian government can beat all these governments it did it it used so many sophisticated tools to shut down any kind of dissent in the Internet. So overcoming censorship in the Internet Internet meaning cheap media anyone can create news in the Internet. You don't need to have any authorization from the government to do that. So it was it was the alternative to do that. The Internet was was very important and to overcome censorship was was very important so the entities to shoot censorship movement played a huge role. And the the keyboard for the anti censorship movement is for four because what the Tunisian government would do when he would like to to open a web site nothing. A Web site that is censored in Tunisia. Nothing in the page shows that it's actually censored but the code that comes up on your screen is fourth floor which means that there is a technical problem that it's not it's not someone who's preventing you from from getting into this Web site. So the whole movement was called the anti for four movement and and there were so many agitation before spring 2010. But the reason why spring 2010 beginning from February February 2010 things really went into a new phase because the government really censored so many Web sites many blogs about hundreds 100 blogs one of them is mine that was in February. So we created a movement of anti censorship and we used Facebook advocates these pages and we had demonstrations digital demonstrations people holding signs of a.. 4 or 4 so people are creative and they were doing very interesting thing things like this so Dexter is involved in here and here and it was called Cyber swallow beans meaning leave me alone. That's. And everyone was was agreeing on this
basic slogan a seemingly apolitical slogan because people were afraid from talking talking politics. So this way using these codes the vehicles that the government is using force for and these kinds of basic slogans people were started to talk and started to make these photographs and post them on on Facebook and we tried to do a street demonstration we tried to do to go from Facebook to the streets and so we had this event in May 22nd 2010. And of course the government went wild about this. And they they sent so many plainclothes policemen and actual policemen. They they were beating people in the streets of Tunis in May 22nd. And that was a test. It proved to us that we can move things from the Internet to the streets. And I went actually back in the summer of July and August and we tried to do a flashmob the first political flash mob and in Tunisia. And of course with that with such a government which is a government that is supervising everything they they found about it. They found out about it at the end the day of the flash mob. I had like about two cars and three motorcycles in front of my home and everyone was basically we were prevented from going through the flash mob. This is to show you that we were trying to move things from the Internet into into the streets. WikiLeaks played a role in this and that in Tunisia some of my friends and I want to claim that I was part of this including because I am here in the States so we can I can I can touch the WikiLeaks subject but some of my friends in Europe. Have exclusive rights from WikiLeaks to publish the Tunisian documents of WikiLeaks and they called it Tony leaks and these are the two pages. So you have the actual Facebook page and you have the the Web site. And this was by the end of November and this played a role in rallying people in the Internet about this because what what the main revelations in the tiny leaks documents is that the huge corruption of the Tunisian government which is which. Which was well known by the Tunisian people. But here we have it with the stamp of the US government. So U.S. governments saying very clearly that the Tunisian government is a mafia. This is the actual words. Actually this is quote that the Tunisian government is a mafia. So this is few weeks about this the whole revolution started. Mi go here first and then. Welcome back. Okay. So the reason why Facebook played a role here why Facebook was possible to use even though we have this huge censorship. Well for very
simple reason because in Facebook when used hate TTP H TTP yes you can enter any profile you would like to go to. So what we did is so YouTube by the way is censored. We can we can see those YouTube videos in Tunisia before January 14th. And it's really censored. You can't really even with proxies. You can't you can do it. But since Facebook had the platform of video sharing everything went into into Facebook blogging video sharing forums everything went into Facebook using the HECS Gateway and that's how we were able to overcome this the censorship and the same for the teen elite. So the actual website opportunity did not have much many visits. Because it's censored obviously. So most of the stuff that was published in the 20 links Web site was actually moved away to to the main pages of Facebook so people were able to see these documents through Facebook not through the actual website of Tunisia. Now so November 2 leaks the end of November 20 leaks and then we have December 17th December 17th is the start of the whole thing. So and things started with with texts like these. So again this is how news sharing was happening. So here we have the lawyer female lawyer from Sidi Bouzid the the city where we have this guy Mohamed Bouazizi setting himself on fire. And she wrote this paragraph. This small bag of say basically describing what she what she saw. And she described this event and she said well people are starting to demonstrate about this. And people started sharing sharing this text. So like I did in my pre-flight and if you are my friend you can see this even if it's censored you can actually see the text. So news started to to to be shared by people. The first video is the same thing. Video sharing not only text sharing but video sharing. So we have one of the first videos which is this one. So this is around for 455 PM and the actual event happened in the morning about 10:00 a.m. So by by the afternoon we have people sharing the actual video of the starting of the demonstration in front of the governorate of Sidi Bouzid. Let me actually show you this is this is a key video. This is this is really one of them. Um hallmarks of of the of the whole Tunisian Revolution is this video. Amateur video using cell phones like you have here. The whole thing the whole thing is a revolution is based on this connection. People on the ground filming very short clips sending them to Facebook and then from Facebook to TV satellite channels outside Tunisia. This is this
is the basic chain that really helped breaking the silence of the whole thing in December 17th watching these pictures was was not what was it was not really a familiar scene. This is unusual to see in Tunisia to have people attacking one of the symbols. Actually the most important symbol of the of the government in this city in Sidi Bouzid. This is the location of the governorate of Sidi Bouzid totally and familiar. Oui oui oui oui. Let's let's put it this way in 23 years we never seen these pictures. This was shock. So it might have happened before the age of Facebook and maybe we we would not be able to see this to even hear about it. But now we can't see it just a few hours after it happened and this is important oh five minutes I can OK. So Twitter Twitter played a very minor role in this. And these are the first tweets about what happened actually. This is how we created like me and others to France. We created the hashtag of Sidi Bouzid and this was the night after December 17. So we thought well let's let's try to push this in Twitter and really Twitter was used mainly as a platform to reach international media because not many Tunisians use Twitter like Facebook because for Facebook there are about 2 million Tunisian members in Facebook and here this is for a country that has only about eleven million people. So for 11 many people to have 2 million on Facebook this shows you how how how important is Facebook for food for Tunisians so what the main contribution was this way. So what we did is we had these closed groups hidden from the government where we can share information so people who are outside the country can get information from people who are in the ground. So it happens that we had these few friends people who were with me in the student movement in the 1990s who were from Sidi Bouzid and they were sending me these news flash about what's happening. And they weren't happening. December 17th December 18th towards this December 22nd December 22nd is a key date because it's then that things started to go outside the room from the city and to other cities. And clearly this was going to be a movement. We can see that this is like a small newsroom without professional journalists just people who are volunteers and sharing news and and then sharing them with the public. The other connection is with the old media. So this is the so-called new media here that connection is with the old media. So when you have
friends in Al Jazeera TV channel that that's very important because then the moment they get
the right information I send it to someone who is in the newsroom of an actual TV satellite
channel and not any TV satellite channel channel the most watched TV satellite channel in the
Arabic world. This is for example this connection. And that was I was not able to talk about this
like few a few weeks ago but now we decided my friend Dina we did. He works in the
newsroom of Al Jazeera TV channel activities satellite channel to reveal this secret because this
was an organized. This was an organized effort. This it was like very clear self aware
coordination and we were doing that since December 17th up to January 14th so that the idea
of the contradiction between old and the new media is not really relevant here. We were
working together so something that would happen in 5 p.m. in Sidi Bouzid or in gasoline or any
of these remote places in Tunisia would go to the News primetime program in the Jazeera News
primetime program Al Jazeera which which airs at 10:00 p.m. daily is the most important news
program watched in Tunisia by the first week around December 22nd. It was clear that the
regime as a media as a media structure was overthrown because people were not watching the
TV satellite channel. Official TV satellite channel to get their news. Tunisians started to watch
two things Facebook and the jazzy and the regime was effectively overthrown by by December
22nd December 2013. We I'm giving you the date because we know how they are. There are
companies who can measure how many people are watching the news prime time program in
the official TV Tunisian TV satellite channel and the Jazeera TV satellite channel. And by that
time clearly people started basically they shut down the Tunisian official news program. Then
we move things even in a more sophisticated way. So we started by the third week to have. So
we had professional journalists trained journalists and we established an actual newsroom
following the basics of journalism. And these trained journalists were leading this. So we used
Facebook clearly as news as it used a news agency as we called it. Actually this page we called
the news agency of the protest of the Tunisian streets. And this was working closely with the
Jazeera So just to give you a few details what we do as well we I heard something happening in
this city and so we use the actual old traditional tools calling people on the phone on Skype.
What happened so the moment we would have three or four sources confirming the same event we relayed to other places including Al Jazeera Al Jazeera if we just need to hear something. It would basically send us a hint. We'll try to check with me this event or this demonstration of if there are people who are killed in this place or that place so things were working this way and we see. So we have basically yes. These are the two less lines. One major tool that really helped us do this is pages like these Tunisian youth and really young men who are using the internet are very skilled and they can't cheat people into doing things. So one of the things they very young people did is they started this page called simply Tunisia. They started it like two years ago sharing interesting videos shocking videos and so on and so forth and they started collecting members. By now it has about 600000 62 members and this is a platform that we used effectively beginning from December 17th. Anything you would like to share. You put it here and you have basically three hundred thousand views per day for this page. Just to give you an example to compare with the old media the largest most important Tunisian newspaper prints about only 70000 copy per day. This this page has more. People. Has has more views than than a traditional newspaper Al Jazeera news Prime. TV program which goes back then to Facebook because if someone missed the the the the news program at 10:00 p.m. Then he or she would go to Facebook and see them and share them again and again and watch them as as these because of course it's different to see a video clip taken from a cell phone posted by a regular person then to see the same video clip in a TV satellite channel that validates its credibility. And that's why Al Jazeera also played a huge role in this. This is for example when I was invited in December 22nd and I was talking about this very problem this issue of how this association was work it was not of course going to reveal that we were working together because the Tunisian government was already crying for a conspiracy and so on so forth between the dissidents and the Catholic government which is which is not accurate. But it something like that happened. We had the green light for from Al Jazeera editors basically to to publish whatever we we wanted. So two things. Again it's these guys who who after December 17th resisted and went consistently to the streets even though facing the
bullets. It's by the end it's their decision. It's them who created the whole thing. But on the other hand the people who were helping in the media people that were using the Internet to help the revolution the media branch of the revolution never trained in Serbia and never read any book by any American scholar to do that. So I'll stop that stop there. Well thank you very much again. It's very interesting to have some technical context to add to our discussion. The next speaker.