

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Tunisia, Al Jazeera, and Lessons for Public Diplomacy ^[1]

During the street demonstrations in Tunis, amidst the signs demanding “Ben Ali Out” were placards saying “Thank you, Al Jazeera.”

The Qatar-based pan-Arab television network has never been allowed to open a bureau in Tunisia – a prescient if ultimately unsuccessful tactic by Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s government – but that did not stop it from serving as a relay mechanism, collecting material from Facebook pages, independent websites, blogs, Twitter feeds, cell phone video, and other citizen journalism venues and feeding it to the vast satellite television audience in Tunisia and throughout the Arab world. The extent of opposition to Ben Ali and his vicious response were visible to all.

Satellite television and online communication do not respect political borders, and governments’ measures to block them can be successful only briefly; such efforts are like trying to hold back the tide. For Tunisians, whose own, government-controlled news media provided no honest coverage of the uprising, Al Jazeera became a priceless supplier of information. Evidence of the revolt’s increasing traction was amply documented, encouraging those who had believed at first that the dictatorship was too strong to be toppled.

Information is the sustenance of revolution. Whether it is conveyed in a note surreptitiously passed hand to hand or in a broadcast the entire world can watch, evidence of corruption and calls for citizens to rally in the streets pull individuals together, letting them share a reservoir of truth. This is politically intoxicating, and it fuels the collective courage needed to challenge a government.

Sometimes these challenges will fail because those who hold power are too strong and are willing to fight back, as was the case in Iran in 2009. But in countries such as Egypt and Algeria, where the governments’ strength is questionable, events in Tunisia will be watched closely – by government opponents looking for pointers and by governments themselves as they search for ways to avoid a collapse like Ben Ali’s.

This is not a new phenomenon. In 1989, West German television penetrated borders and delivered images from Tiananmen Square to East Germans. They were encouraged by the Chinese protests and a few months later took their own steps toward democracy by ripping apart the Berlin Wall. Today, information is far more plentiful, and in the Arab world Al Jazeera’s credibility is such that governments must appraise its influence carefully.

In Tunisia, the uprising was triggered by the self-immolation of a young man who was overwhelmed by the hopelessness of life under oppressive rule. His sacrifice galvanized thousands more whose patience was at an end. The Ben Ali government controlled traditional news outlets and was clearly surprised by the speed and pervasiveness of the information

flow, particularly the incendiary messages and images (not all of them accurate) that spread through social media. The government's repressive response was depicted on blood red web pages and in text messages that moved in such volume that public anger soon outstripped the government's ability to contain it.

There are lessons here for those who conduct public diplomacy. The relative ease of sidestepping government media controls by using new media was once again on display. Also underscored was the ability of an outside information source – in this case Al Jazeera – to provide news that a government did not want its people to know about. Publics can increasingly be reached directly, and they are increasingly receptive to messages from beyond conventional providers.

An unforeseen event such as the suicide in Tunisia could happen elsewhere. The potent combination of satellite television and social media ensures that news about any such occurrence will move rapidly through the Arab world, and public anger such as that seen in Tunisia could explode.

In the era of Al Jazeera and Facebook, repression will not remain invisible for long and dissent will be harder to contain. Governments that are taken by surprise and respond as Ben Ali's did in Tunisia will find themselves unable to survive. Local, regional, and world opinion will quickly turn against them, and gradually the ability to inform and to mobilize will supersede the absolutist controls some governments still embrace. In yet more countries, we may see protestors waving signs saying, "Thank you, Al Jazeera."
