

Social networks, mobilizations, and Democracy

Fabrice EPELBOIN, *Teacher at Science Po Paris.*

Social networks are the projection, in a social space orchestrated by algorithms, of society – or rather, societies. It's a global space where what constitutes boundaries is of a linguistic order and is unique to each one of us. If you speak a foreign language, new spaces open for you, and up to now, there's been no need for a passport to gain access.

It's also a space where each person draws, through connections of friendship, "likes", or subscriptions to groups, a map of their own space orchestrated by algorithms specific to each social network – algorithms which all have in common the effect of enclosing each person in their "bubbles", encounters in territory they've already explored, and recommendations from the algorithm.

Naturally, the darkness of our societies is reflected therein, sometimes accentuated, even transformed by powerful mechanisms of protection specific to the digital world. We often cite Dunbar's number, which suggests that we cannot establish human relationships with more than 150 people, as the very example of a constraint of the real world that is shattered in the virtual one.

Regarding **governance and different political regimes**, certain political regimes have succeeded better than others in launching into these digital territories and in taking a role in them vis-à-vis their citizens. China¹, which learned how to keep its digital sovereignty and thereby even keep control of its destiny, is in the process of building a new model of a "Big Brother" society based on the surveillance and continual evaluation of citizens, determining their access to multiple services (public or private, like credit) and freedoms (like the right to move around).

The Philippines learned how to project a dictatorship and its distinctiveness onto Facebook, in order to find a form of sovereignty therein, through the presence of

authorities on this social network but also thanks to a network of militants to whom harassment of political opponents and the defense of the present regime are delegated.

The "progressive" western democracies endeavor to rethink social networks and must still imagine how to project their sovereignty² into these spaces, which, failing that, remain in very large part under American sovereignty, as is regularly shown by Facebook's methods of censorship, which don't hesitate to judge a Courbet painting as pornographic but are very lax with a racist speech that is protected by the First Amendment of the American Constitution. This sharing of sovereignty between Facebook and western democracies should materialize, in France, with a law

1. See in the following pages the contribution from Marylaure Bloch on the topic of Chinese Social Credit.

2. See the concept of "soft sovereignty" in the previous chapter.

meant to fight against hate, whose legal definition promises heated discussions.

But for those who, within a society, are **opposed to its governance**, social networks also offer an obscurity that can be a form of protection.

We have thus observed, during the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009 and a few years later during the Arab Spring, that the pseudonymity offered by social networks has enabled an opposition to unify, organize, disrupt, even overthrow oppressive governments.

“Obscure” opinions also find refuge in social networks. For those in a society whose ideas are not reflected in the media (due to censorship or self-censorship), social networks offer shelter for discussing and sharing opinions in relative obscurity.

If a government tries to apply a form of censorship in the country it is responsible for, we systematically find content censored on social networks – peer-to-peer relationships (and the algorithms) play the role of content distribution formerly played by the mass media.

Thus, the ideas and content censored in the media take a disproportionately large scope on social networks, and the communities unified by this content have the opportunity to learn the rules specific to this environment and their uses to political ends well before the communities whose opinions are reflected and promoted in traditional media (individual dialectic, methods of dialogue and of meeting people, etc.).

In France, and for a generation, the communities unified by the ideas of Jean-Marie Le Pen, excluded from the media at the end of the 90s, as well as those brought together more recently by Dieudonné, and more broadly the France of “no” concerning the 2005 European Constitution referendum, have found on the web and on social networks a space of free expression

where these communities have been able to develop militant practices – where other French political currents are just starting, for the most avant-garde, to prompt their troops to get involved, without any particularly advanced strategy due to the inexperience of their troops.

Let us add to this complexity that the political parties have never learned how to project themselves onto social networks. In these networks, ideas unify people more than programs – which are just a collection of ideas – thus giving birth to discussion spaces which productively unify individuals coming from a wide variety of current policies, sometimes totally opposing ones. As such, the Citizens’ Initiative Referendum (RIC), very popular among the “Yellow Vest” protesters, has been discussed on social networks for over ten years, and millions of people have been reached by these discussions, many of them coming from “extreme” parties (left or right), to the point of infusing respective policies into their programs under the pressure of their respective militants.

Finally, the **algorithm** itself has a dark side. Without going so far as to attribute non-financial intentions to Facebook, this single factor plays a huge part in what we perceive today as the “dark side” of social networks. The main purpose of these algorithms is to optimize the platform’s revenue and to proceed, through the magic of “artificial intelligence”, with a mixture of content served to us on demand at any time. This algorithm continually improves this mix to generate more “engagement”, meaning more time spent on the platform, to offer Facebook what a former director of French broadcasting very cleverly called “available brain time”. Empirically, today everything shows that the best fuels the Facebook algorithm has found for

generating more engagement are hatred and anger, which can only be attached to a dark side in our western societies, where these feelings are banned or narrowly limited in the public sphere.

Social networks and mobilization?

The first social mobilization of importance that we can unquestionably attach to social networks is the “Green Revolution” in Iran in 2009. The tool of the time was Twitter, mainly used more for raising international public awareness than for coordinating actions.

The subsequent Arab Spring saw Facebook, which in numerous Arab societies was already a substitute for a social space crippled by their ruling regimes, serve as a tool for mobilization and coordination of a willfully leaderless movement. This principal feature was, at that time, an innovation for a hybrid movement³.

Since then, the social protests born of more or less coordinated and more or less intentional interactions on social networks have multiplied. From the Indignados in Barcelona to Occupy Wall Street in the US by way of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement or the opposition to Erdogan in 2013, the number of cases to study from the last ten years is rather sizeable.

In the end, we are in the same situation regarding social movements as all organizations facing digital technology. Two methods of transformation await them: “digital transformation”, which essentially con-

sists of improving an existing organization and using technology to improve its performance, and “disruption”, which consists of reinventing the organization from possibilities offered by digital technology, to compete with an established organization.

In this perspective, the fate and the transformation of a company, a union, a political party, or a democracy are not that different. Some will know how to transform while avoiding disruption, as is the case with China or the Philippines, each one using their own approach; others, particularly those who haven’t taken seriously the work involved in transforming to face this new territory that is digital technology, will be immediately disrupted, as was the case for the Tunisian regime.

The Fifth Republic of France is currently facing this type of disruptive phenomenon with the Yellow Vests, perfectly symbolized by what has become, over the course of the protests, a demand they all carry: the Citizens’ Initiative referendum, which is as such a proposition of disruption of a presidential regime conceived in its time to provide stability – though lacking popular legitimacy – to the “winner”, and which was very important after a Fourth Republic marked by parliamentary instability.

In these movements, social networks have three major roles.

1/ They serve as an alternative to the media, which militants see as a faction of the oppressors – and rightly so, more or less; the relationship to the power of the media in France and in Tunisia are not comparable, but the silence observed by French media regarding police violence during the first two months of

3. That is to say real and virtual: purely virtual forms of social protest such as Anonymous having already demonstrated the possibility of a leaderless movement, it should be noted in passing that the Tunisians had previously imagined the first hybrid leaderless movement, “Takriz”, a mix between Anonymous and Black Bloc.

the movement tends to show critical flaws in a media system, whose original mission was to be an integral part of a democratic system.

2/ They also serve to coordinate actions, which can take very simple forms: a meeting on Facebook, which was the first course of action for the Yellow Vests, just as it was at the origin of Tahrir Square in Cairo. They can also take more complex forms and help to organize a protest movement in a much finer way, dividing up roles and planning more articulate actions.

3/ Finally, they help to feed a positive feedback loop, whose role is to provide the movement with its dynamic and its motivation, which is most often achieved through recycling certain content. In Tunisia, during the beginning of the revolution, this positive feedback loop was composed of captured videos of police violence that were uploaded and shared. One incident of police violence gave birth to two protests, which generated two incidents, which led to four protests, and so on. From a certain dynamic, these positive feedback loops transform a protest into a riot, a riot into an insurrection, and an insurrection into a revolution. Ben Ali, who understood the internet and technology very astutely, was careful to block access to the Facebook page that allowed videos to be uploaded, but relays outside the country were able to recover these videos and upload them from abroad.

In France, we observe these same positive feedback loops with equally effective images and videos of police violence as a result of their undergoing a form of censorship in the media. We also observe a spectacular diversion of traditional media content, particularly the virulent interventions of certain editorialists and politicians within reach taking sides against the Yellow Vests, which are recycled *ad infinitum*, further feeding

the anger⁴.

Algorithms, editors of information

Particularly on Facebook since the algorithm was changed at the beginning of 2018, it's the individual users who have had the most impact on content distribution. It may be recalled that this change in algorithm turned a flow of information previously determined by a user's "page likes" and content published by the user's contacts into a flow of information composed of content discussed in groups whose membership is linked to the geographic proximity of their contacts. This modification to the algorithm changed, overnight, the nature and the origin of the information that comprises our individual Facebook feed. One of the most visible changes to the algorithm was the dramatic decrease in media pages, which had previously done much of the distribution of the content of said media on Facebook. Today, these media can only reach their readers on Facebook effectively by paying a high fee to the platform or by counting on their readers to pass content along to others with whom the media had lost contact long ago. Community management was not their core business.

It may also be recalled that half the population get informed uniquely through Facebook and that more than two-thirds use Facebook as a news source. In practice, Facebook is not a source but a distributor, similar to an 80s television set except that it does not produce content and that its method of distribution is

4. This also explains the dual position of 24-hour news channels, at once one of the most hated media in France and one with a steadily growing audience.

particularly complex, gives ultra-personalized results (hence “information bubbles”), and will remain whatever darkness may occur (because of the use of algorithms based on artificial intelligence, which hardly enables retro-engineering).

We have therefore entered, much more than before, a newsworthy ecosystem very largely dominated by Facebook which is vested with the capacity to editorialize the news, which is to say, assemble a collection of content which users use to give meaning to the world they live in. A role that was attributed to the TV news a generation ago recurred for a certain elite in a grand daily paper like *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro*. This elite have not really changed their habits of news intake⁵, whereas the intermediate and popular classes have radically changed their way of getting news. This explains the appearance, on the occasion of the Yellow Vests crisis, of a dramatic hiatus between the world of journalism and the people.

From the point of view of influence, a massive portion of the population has passed into the hands of social networks (and by extension into the hands of their users and algorithms), and generally more into the function of distribution than into the production of content. This discreet paradigm shift was poorly grasped by the media who see in distribution a function with little added value, a prejudice inherited from the time when this distribution was limited to transmission and a sales network. We'll return to this point later on.

Parallel to this shift over the last ten years of distri-

5. Today they read *Le Monde* AND *Le Figaro*, but on line, imagining that this change of medium suffices for reaching modernity.

bution and audience (and therefore, influence) toward Facebook, France has seen the rise of a phenomenon of militancy specific to the regime of individual censorship that has been established in France since the 80s.

Whereas in the USA an identity militant advocating the supremacy of the white race would have no problem finding a medium that reflected their opinion and no hindrance in broadcasting their opinion on Facebook or elsewhere, they would quite alternatively be in a country where racism, antisemitism, homophobia, and many other things are censored and the publication of such content can bring about heavy legal sanctions.

The media territory which has developed in such a legal framework puts militants of such causes in front of the challenge of recreating an alternative media ecosystem by adapting its expression and its militant approach, if only to find shelter from the law. It should be noted that far less dismal causes have had themselves excluded from a large part of the media ecosystem without the need to appeal to the law. Such was the case of the opposition to the 2005 European Constitution, whose partisans also gathered almost exclusively on social networks to exchange views and to campaign, for lack of seeing their opinions reflected in the media. Ultimately, since the end of the 90s, a large part of the public opinion, sometimes represented in a deliberately caricatural way, has thus more or less been excluded from the media.

The result is the development of renewed and particularly effective militant practices consisting of establishing themselves as distributors in order to use, to influential ends, content whose authors had ne-

ver imagined it would be used in this way. The most striking example in France is a blog called "*Français de souche*" ("Native-born French"), related to the identity sphere which attracts a volume of around 5 million visitors monthly, an audience comparable to that of a major daily newspaper. The blog is actually just a press review, made up of articles that mostly come from mainstream media but read by a community assembled around the identity trend (far right). Thus, a sentimental article published in a left-leaning newspaper imploring its readers to show solidarity with migrants would be served to a radically different audience from the initial target in order to galvanize and unify the community in its opposition of the government's migratory policy.

This type of strategy is at work in the propagation of "fake news", and we have seen multiple resurgences of members of the identity movement publishing entirely factual articles from the mainstream press dealing with the "Marrakesh treaty", accompanied simply by a short commentary intended to put the internet user in a state of mind that leads them to conclude that the information is biased and deliberately misleading even before they read it. These strategies, playing on the effect of repulsion, are not only impressively effective but also of astounding economic means. The blog "*Français de souche*", which thus creates such an audience worthy of the largest French daily papers, is maintained by a single person, while its reports represent dozens of journalists.

This type of rival blog, which settles for being composed essentially of press reviews, has been a common militant practice in France for more than ten years, foreshadowing the shift of the influence of content toward its distribution. These practices of "diverting"

distribution (which could be seen as "influence theft") are now common on Facebook. The most scathing example is none other than the positive feedback loops which feed the anger of the Yellow Vests and which are mostly composed of content from the media, content which rightfully opposes the movement.

The crucial question of content distribution

As a result of the change in Facebook's algorithm, pages "belonging" to the media, which hitherto ensured distribution of their content, are now, for the most part, in the hands of the users.

We are, however, in a crisis of confidence⁶ where politicians, political parties, unions, and journalists can't even capture the trust of 10% of the population. In these conditions, at best the content that journalists produce is questioned and disparaged, and at worst, it serves as ammunition in sterile dialectic battles between political militants. Sterile because these battles are not meant to convince anyone of anything but rather to indicate their inclusion in one camp and their opposition to another.

Only seasoned, experienced militants know how to use this content to an end of conversion, with the goal of convincing or destabilizing the adversary. These disciplined militants, armed with political content deftly accumulated over time, are apt to disrupt the discourse they may find on the social networks. Thus, it is very easy to destabilize a pro-European with a few selected links to quality sources intended to illustrate a choice of: the system of tax avoidance in Eu-

6. Measured at regular intervals over the last ten years by [CEVIPOF/Sciences Po](#).

rope, the Kafkaesque side of European decision-making mechanisms, the effects of the monetary policy of the European Central Bank, or the power of lobbies in Brussels.

Of course, we find these veterans among the ranks of the extremes, not because their ideas are more solid than those they oppose, but because they're experts in the field, in their own dialectics, and in the communal game that deviates from the traditional political rules of engagement. As such it is striking that the far-right militants show much less aggression on social networks than those of "La République En Marche!"; who largely discovered the political use of social networks during the last presidential campaign. The ensuing dialectic battle wholly resembles a confrontation between the foreign legion and a group of scouts. The impact on democratic pillars

It is important, in order to respond to such a question, to distinguish, especially in the French context, what falls under democracy and what falls under the order of the Republic. From a strictly democratic point of view, there is nothing much to fear from an angry mob who is demanding the establishment of the Citizens' Initiative referendum. This form of democracy, practiced in Switzerland the same as California, has largely shown this. It is also useful to note, in order to dedramatize the possible consequences in France, that our Swiss neighbors, whose democratic and institutional stability we can only emphasize, have, like us, a political arena dominated by a far-right party and not lacking in provocative, even outright batty, political personalities.

What is threatened by social networks, in Tunisia yesterday and in France today, is the Republic and, in the

case of France, the translation it made in its constitution of democracy, a representative democracy, into a presidential regime.

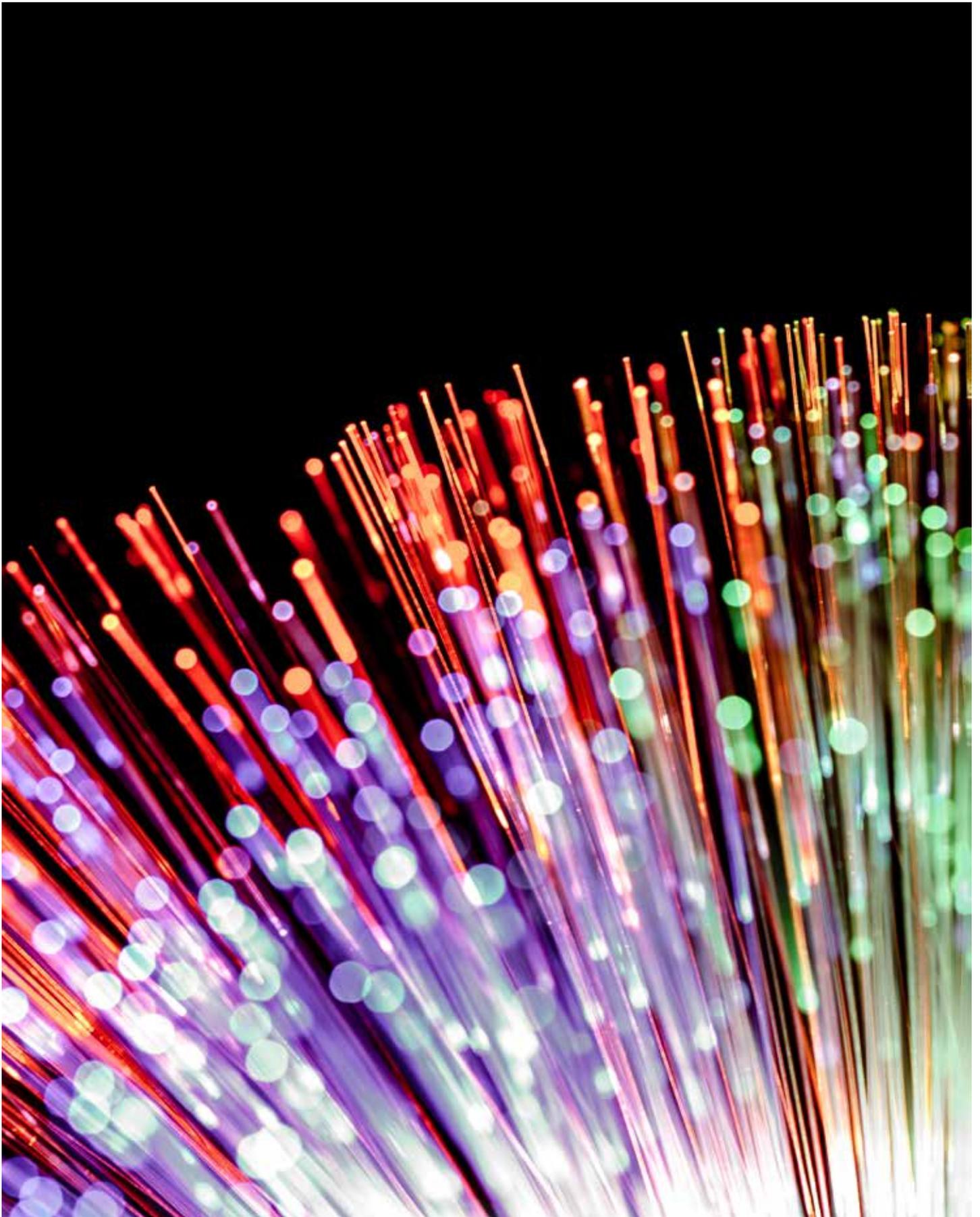
To understand this crisis, widely shared in the French population⁷, it is vital to review some fundamental steps of the Fifth Republic, starting with its founding. The French Constitution was written to respond to an institutional crisis: a parliamentary regime, characterized by chronic instability, due to precarious alliances between political parties. It was also written for a man, General De Gaulle.

To compensate for this instability, our constitution gave the one who "came in first" an over-representation in the parliament, in order to secure for the presidential regime a chamber whose political color would be in line with the executive.

While the various co-existences didn't significantly undermine its functionality, the change of a seven-year to a five-year presidential term synchronized the elections of the executive and the parliament, rendering the parliament completely subservient to the executive – which many political scientists consider a problem of democratic order. The arrival of Emmanuel Macron, whose strategy of access to power consisted of circumventing the bipartisanship that constituted the bedrock of our constitution, reinforced the executive even more, rendering the traditional left-right alternation inoperative, generating a feeling of general frustration among the people.

In this context, social networks are merely the outlet

7. 70% of the population think democracy works poorly or very poorly in France / [CEVIPOF 2019](#).



of this democratic frustration, and France is not the first democratic nation to know this type of crisis – far from it. This frustration takes, according to the settings and features of each social network, specific forms. It can translate into the real world in different ways, according to the populations who manage to crystallize this frustration and turn it into a protest movement.

With a feeling of injustice toward the economic system, crystallized with the help of social networks by an urban and majority-student population, we saw the appearance of movements such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States seven short years ago and Nuit Debout in France nearly three years ago.

Today, in France, it's the suburban middle class who crystallize a similar sentiment in a different protest movement whose dynamics are close to the Arab Spring as far as its operation on Facebook is concerned.

None of these social protest movements born on social networks have ever made the slightest hostile claim toward democracy. On the contrary, at the heart of all of these movements is a demand for an increased democracy and a somewhat fundamental re-assessment of the political and economic system. They all have in common a demand that was summed up perfectly in the statement that appeared at the beginning of the Arab Spring: **Democracy and Dignity.**