



Towards a multimedia approach in geographical research and education.

Reflections from the web-research “Al centro di Tunisi – Au centre de Tunis”

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Abstract

Web-based documentaries (web-docs) and interactive documentaries (i-docs) represent an innovative form of multimedia research and communication, consisting of a combination of multiple media such as videos, images, audios and texts within a unique, open and freely accessible web-platform. They are based on interactivity, trans-mediality and non-linearity; they do not impose a specific author's perspective on the observed reality but allow visitors to explore the different media, voices and sources collected within the documentary and interact with them, developing their personal interpretation and points of view. Therefore, i-docs may become a resource for geographical education and research. Within the educational field, multimedia actually facilitates the individualization and personalization of training, stimulates discovery, interaction and problem solving, and favours an active approach to learning. As regards the research, multimedia may integrate the conventional tools during the fieldwork and offer new resources for the description and narration of the space, as well as a more effective circulation of the results. Starting from these broader reflections, the paper focuses on the particular case of the web-research “Al centro di Tunisi – Au centre de Tunis”, a multimedia experimental project upon the practice of the public space in Tunis two years after the Jasmine Revolution of 2011. Through the description of the project from the theoretical and methodological point of view, the paper ends by suggesting some possible applications of the web-research in geographical education and didactics.

Keywords: Multimedia, I-documentaries, Web-research, Tunisian Revolution, Geographical Education

1. Introduction

The use of multimedia as a basic resource both in research and in geographical education has been gradually making headway. As regarding research, multimedia can integrate the

sources of traditional investigation, offering, mostly in empirical field research, new instruments to describe and narrate reality, as well as innovative forms to spread results scientifically. From the point of view of geographical education, the application of

different media allows for the development of an active multimodal approach, based on the direct relationship with the reality being studied. Multimedia facilitates multiplying the points of view on a given phenomenon, developing the critical analysis, *problem solving* and group work, as well as a higher emotional involvement than conventional instruments would.

From this double point of view, the paper presents the results and the perspectives opened by the bilingual multimedia research project “Al centro di Tunisi. Geografie dello spazio pubblico dopo una Rivoluzione – Au centre de Tunis. Géographies de l’espace publique après une Révolution” (available at the web address <http://webdoc.unica.it>), realised by a team of geographers, video-makers and photographers during the year 2013¹. The project aims at investigating, two years after the so-called “Jasmine Revolution”, the changes occurred in the practice and the perception of public spaces in the centre of Tunis. The approach adopted in the project is defined as web-research, meaning the use of the web form and of multimedia as a resource both in the fieldwork and in the re-elaboration and circulation of the materials produced.

The article has been structured as follows. The first paragraph suggests a review of the international literature on multimedia in the research and the didactics of geography, later focusing on the web- or i-documentaries as a successful synthesis of a multimedia and visual approach in the geographic research and records. The second paragraph focuses on the web-research “Al centro di Tunisi – Au centre de

Tunis”, either in connection with the theoretical and methodological basis, or with the results achieved and the perspectives the project has opened. Finally, the third paragraph introduces and debates some educational prospects, as well as the possible didactic applications the web-research offers.

2. Multimedia in action

The centrality gained by multimedia in the educational field is certainly not new, and literature has already highlighted its potentialities in teaching and learning practice. The advantages offered by multimedia experiences in the different levels of the educational field have been underlined since the mid 1990s, pointing out how “the most important advantage of multimedia over other forms of instruction is its flexibility in presenting information and its quick access in providing feedback” (Chang and Chen, 1995, p. 103). The use (and above all the combination) of different media, particularly thanks to the new technologies, “facilitates the effective management of learning, allowing individualization and personalization of learning, provides rapid information, stimulates discovery learning, the interactive learning model, provides opportunities for simulation, problem solving, deepening knowledge (...), stimulates cognitive confrontations, determines active and interactive training and gives the learner cognitive and informational autonomy” (Tudor, 2013, p. 683).

The multimedia approach is also, and above all, “multi-modal” (ibidem, 2013) in its using and integrating different tools and devices in didactics: web 2.0 (Alexander, 2006), podcasts (Lazzari, 2009), blogs and social-networks (Twitter and Facebook) (Wright, 2010; Williams and Jacobs, 2004; Wang et al., 2012), videos and images (maps, charts and photos) (Bignante and Rossetto, 2011; Goldman et al., 2007), games (Tüzün et al., 2009), as well as texts (articles, essays, diaries, notes, tales and so on) (Ryan, 2001), animations, but more frequently varying combinations of these different tools in the creation of on-line multi-platforms, accessible and open and therefore freely usable, integrable and modifiable (Qingsong, 2012). “Multimedia

¹ The research group involved in the field includes eight people: four geography researchers at the University of Cagliari (Raffaele Cattedra, Maurizio Memoli and Matteo Puttilli) and the Polytechnic of Turin (Francesca Governa), three photographers and video-makers from the agency Prospekt Photographers of Milan (Bruno Chiaravallotti, Claudio Jampaglia and Samuele Pellicchia) and the free-lance photographer Rosi Giua. They were joined in the field and, above all, in the post-production stage, by many other people referred to on the research web site. The project involved the realisation of a fieldwork in Tunis (27 March – 11 April 2013) and the long revision of the materials collected, resulting in the publication of the site online on 9th December 2013).

learning” develops through a combination of texts, images, words, colours, meanings and messages; it can exploit and vehiculate already available contents (both of a professional and an amateur kind), or, alternatively, stimulate the self-production and the participation of teachers and students in the sharing of materials (Gilroy, 2009), the collective learning, *learning by doing*, *problem solving*, as well as the connection between theory and practices (Lieshout, Egyedi and Bijker, 2001; Walmsley, 2003). Although some problems with the educational use of multimedia still remain unsolved or poorly analysed (because of cost, control, effectiveness, accessibility and potential negative intellectual outcomes) (Olson, 1997; Lieshout, Egyedi and Bijker, 2001), the experiences both among teachers and students show highly positive results (Wang, Cowie and Jones, 2009; Han, Eom and Shin, 2013). It is a common opinion that, compared to the traditional approaches, multimedia strategies are more incisive in showing either the complexity of reality or the multiple interpretations and points of view, mostly allowing for the development of a real cross-curricular perspective (Goldman et al., 2007; Jacobson, Militello and Baveye, 2009).

2.1 Multimedia in geographical education and research

Simply because of the cross-curricular and multimodal vocation, multimedia has always been connected to geographic research and, in particular, to geography teaching. In a fundamental article written in 1997, Judy Olson introduces some pioneering examples of multimedia educational applications and recognizes in multimedia (intended as “the use of more than one medium – text, still graphics, sound, animation, video”) (Olson, 1997, p. 571) an agent able to modify “the way in which geography is recorded, studied, and communicated” at a deep level (ibidem, p. 571). In particular, “interactive multimedia gives the user control over the order in which to see or hear the information” and it “opens doors for geographers to discover and communicate” (ibidem, p. 571). More recently, Hofsetter (2001) has focused on the prevalently visual character of geography to claim how this subject

naturally tends to use multiple media. This vocation has been further confirmed by the late academic handbooks, which tend to confirm and experiment a visual approach in geographical education (Grainer et al., 2012).

The latest studies on the introduction of multimedia in geography are mostly concentrated on the usefulness of new technologies in the production and use of digital cartography, of GIS and Google Earth (Seong, 1996; Scott and Wesley, 1999; Patterson, 2007; Sinton, 2009), but there are further experiences and experimentations such as *virtual field-work* and *virtual visit* (Stainfold et al., 2000), *digital storytelling* (Porto and Belmonte, 2014), *gaming* (Tüzün et al., 2009), *image production* (Bignante and Rossetto, 2012), *e-participation* (Rocca, 2012) and so on. This is a wide and varied universe, difficult to systematize and still innovative and experimental from many points of view.

However, some later studies on learning results seem to confirm the advantages in the didactics of geography: in a recent paper about teaching in secondary schools, Da Silva and Kvasnak (2012) evaluate the results achieved in geography by mother-tongue and non mother-tongue students within a large sample of classrooms in which multimedia teaching methods were used. These researchers see that, in the American context, multimedia teaching allows an almost complete levelling of all language differences in learning specialist concepts and terms.

Though widely adopted and experimented in didactics, the use of multimedia in geographic research has been further considered either from a theoretic-methodological or an empiric-applicative point of view. Most of the production on the subject focuses on the role of the photographic image as an instrument of geo-ethnographic analysis and as an instrument of field research (Driver, 2003; Rose, 2007; Bignante, 2010); the impact of the other media, such as the role of social networks in redefining the ways of cartographing the geographic space (in a progressively shared and collective way) has been considered as well (Caquard, 2014).

Nevertheless, while analysing the new visual media being used in geographic research from a critical point of view, Bradley Garrett (2010) is

surprised that video (and particularly digital-video) is, “strangely, underutilized, spurned as a method of publication and dissemination in many instances” (p. 523). The author distinguishes two possible approaches of investigation towards the visual image (and, by extension, towards multimedia) in geography. The first, an analytical one, refers to the analysis of the contents in a multimedia product (an image, a video, a map, a blog, etc.) and considers the media as a source, not different from the traditional textbook. The second one, on the contrary, refers to the use of the media in the production and realization of new geographical research, as instruments of investigation, observation of reality and interaction both with the public and the actors involved in it. This approach, though still under-utilized, offers meaningful possibilities to geographical research, so that Garrett states, “geography as a discipline would benefit greatly from expanding the researcher’s toolset to include the consistent use of digital video, especially in ethnographic research” (Garrett, 2010, p. 521), for several reasons. Just to list some of them: from the research (and the field investigation) point of view “video is a useful geographic research tool because it captures movement; video tracks the multisensual fluidity and rhythms of everyday life (...) in the flux and flow of passage and encounters on a sliding range of scale, time and space” (ibidem, p. 522).

The use of the digital video requires a radical review of the relationship between those who research and their investigating field, through new forms of mediation with the reality not compatible with more conventional investigating instruments: “raw fieldwork footage serves as an excellent record keeper and a well-considered, well-shot, well-edited video becomes a multifaceted web of thought, memory, materiality and movement” (ibidem, p. 522).

Where the relationship with the context was above all a reflexive one, it becomes documental through the video, centred on the observation and the documentation of what happens in reality. The researcher becomes an active (and visible) part of the investigating field and voices, more directly and explicitly, the subjects taking part in it (among the several forms of video-research, the participative ones have become

increasingly significant, being centred on the direct involvement of the social actors in the field). Finally, from the point of view of the circulation and availability, the video allows for a deeper involvement of the spectator due to it being more and more frequently a “multisensory representation”: “video is inherently not primarily a visual medium. It is a medium that operates on two of the five senses (...) and I will add that in particular situation video footage (...) invokes olfactory and tactile sensory perceptions as well” (ibidem, p. 532).

In other words, videos and images (as well as other multimedia tools) increase the exploring and cognitive possibilities of geography, extending the sources and instruments of description, representation and analysis of the space. This is not a quantitative but a qualitative extension. Far from being “neutral”, even multimedia images and technologies are the result of the authors’ careful choices (thus encouraging and influencing the public through the operations of selection and organization of the contents). However, thanks to its specific characteristics, every instrument can record and show reality from different angles, multiplying the reading levels and leaving more freedom in observation and interpretation.

2.2 Video-research and i-documentaries

Interactive documentaries (i-docs) (Vicente, 2008; O’Flynn, 2014; Aston and Gaudenzi, 2014; Aufderheide, forthcoming) (also defined web-documentaries or web-docs, since almost all of them turn to on-line platforms to allow interactivity with the spectators) have been recently winning a leading position among the different experiences of video-research. I-docs represent a form of multimedia documentary, organised on a corpus of video clips, images, audios and texts among which users can move freely, developing curiosity and choosing (more or less independently) to which contents they want to refer and which cognitive experiences they want to live.

The definition of i-doc results from the combination of documentary and interactivity: “i-docs generate new, creative, non-linear forms of engagement and interactions between

viewers, authors and the material itself” (Favero, 2013, p. 261). This is made possible by the i-doc hypermedia and trans-medial structure (O’Flynn, 2014), which allows a non-linear writing (thus emphasizing the characteristics already present in hypertexts). In other words, i-docs are structured on “chunks of information connected by links capable of offering a series of pathways” (Favero, 2013, p. 267). With a similar layout “a narrative ceases to be a linear sequence of events imposed by an author” (ibidem, p. 267), but implies the user’s direct participation. The availability of an i-doc implies surfing (similarly to the web) and not simply observing. This is also why i-docs are defined “relational objects” (Gaudenzi, 2014).

This is not the right site for a precise taxonomy of the existing types of web-docs, since case records change significantly: “a transmedia documentary distributes a narrative across more than one platform, it can be participatory or not, can invite audience-generated content or not, tends to be open and evolving, though not always” (O’Flynn, 2014, p. 143). According to Sandra Gaudenzi (2014), four forms of i-docs can be currently identified: Hypertextual, where the user “just explores by clicking on a pre-existing options” within a closed video archive; Conversational, if the “piece is more fluid (...) where one can dialogue into a reconstructed documentary world”, simulating a seamless conversation with the computer; Participative, “when the logic of interaction is based on people’s comments, uploading (sending videos, writing comments, uploading audio files etc...)”; Experiential, if the interaction is supposed to happen also outside the screen and the i-doc suggests occasions of physical interaction in real space.

In all its possible types (from the most open to the most closed ones), the web-docs principle is that users become co-producers of the research and its meaning, and there is not a single possibility of interpreting the fieldwork. Quoting Favero again (2013, p. 262), the contents suggested in i-docs are “relational items situated amidst the events, socialness and physicality of actors’ everyday life”. They create a connection between the researcher and the actors in the field, the investigating tools, and the users that is a multi-directional one, with a

direct involvement of all the subjects’ living spaces.

The impact of these forms of video-research in an educational and didactic context is evident (in particular for geography). i-docs actually allow the user (using Jenner’s effective metaphor, 2014) “to navigate distant worlds”, and to explore close and distant realities and territories through different and multiple points of view, from the inside. Sometimes closer to the journalistic research, web-docs often take an interest in contemporary situations, therefore developing the education to contemporaneity that is (or at least it should be) peculiar to geographic education.

I-docs successfully represent the implementation of a multimedia approach, even though in a single virtual space (and, therefore, a more easily accessible and controllable one). The presence of different media among them develops the attitude to compare, deal with and analyse different sources, as well as critical thought. Finally, the use of web-docs allows for the students’ direct involvement in the developing research even from an emotional point of view, stimulating debates, group work, interaction and active learning.

However, the use of multimedia and web-docs in didactics and learning implies some risks (from the lack of organization to the accessibility of the different technological solutions (Jenner, 2014) and requires some methodological strategies that Derry et al. (2010, p. 6) summarize in four challenges for the teacher: selection, that is how to “decide which elements of a complex environment should be recorded or which aspects of an extensive video corpus should be sampled?”; analysis, that is “what analytical frameworks and practices are available, and which of these are (...) appropriated?”; technology, that is “what technological tools are available and which social tools must be developed (...) to support collecting, archiving, analysing, reporting?”; ethics, that is “how to encourage broad video sharing and reuse while adequately protecting the rights of the human subjects who are represented?”.

3. The web-research “Al centro di Tunisi – Au centre de Tunis”

“Al centro di Tunisi” is a project of experimental research from many points of view². As regarding the subject, it deals with issues of urban geography and in particular with the changes in the use of public spaces in the centre of Tunis after the so-called “Jasmine revolution” in December-February 2011. Generally speaking, Tunis offers a chance for a deeper reflection on the connections between places, social practices and perceptions of the space, as well as on the role of the field research and of the geographic description-narration.

From the methodological point of view, the project represents an example of multimedia research in geography. The form recalls i-docs, especially for the non-linear and open character of the geographic narration. In agreement with the meta-reflection on the *non-representational theory* in social sciences (Thrift, 2008), the research is not going to offer an explicit representation of the analysed phenomenon. On the contrary, it will simply present and keep as many interpretative and reading levels open as there are voices and people involved in the project, among whom the present researchers and authors, whose presence in the field and whose point of view have never been hidden but always clearly expressed and revealed.

3.1 What’s a web-research stands for?

Quoting Bruno Latour’s approach (2005), the basic methodology of the web-research can be expressed through a synthetic concept: hybridization.

If it is true that what we observe and study is a combination of things, words and social relationships, then also the way of studying, analysing and narrating can only be a combination of approaches, words, images, points of view, emotions, skills, looks, and so on. In the web-research, this hybridization has taken place at three complementary levels.

The first level refers to the composition and

the work of the research group. This includes not only different sensibilities (as a standard in cooperative works), but also different professional competences (geographers, journalists, photographers, video-makers, as well as an anthropologist, an art director, a webmaster and a translator, joined in the post-production stage), experiences, pre-knowledge (only some members knew Tunis and the Arabian countries directly) and interests (only some of them had a previous competence of urban geography). Coordinating such a varied group might have been complicated, an informal and spontaneous approach was thus chosen, where everybody’s relationships and different vocations could be mixed, without any pre-established role. Therefore, everybody took part in any stage of the research, sharing the assigned responsibilities and an approach based on collective discussions and debates.

The second level refers to the methodology of the research that can be defined subjective and spontaneous. Rather than a detailed preparation of the mission and of the political, social, economic and spatial conditions of the studied context, the group preferred to choose a fluid and progressive approach, collectively built and shared in the field while gradually dealing with the developing research³. Though creating at first a sense of disorientation towards the final objectives of the research, this allowed a flexible approach to be developed and to build the issues step by step, selecting topics, places, people and investigating tools according to the priorities being gradually shared and to everybody’s sensibility. As for the techniques, they are hybrid too and range from the most orthodox qualitative methodologies, typical of the post-structuralism geography (interviews, participated observation, etc.), to visual research techniques practised by those who, by profession, use images to describe

² This paragraph resumes and revises a text published on the site <http://webdoc.it> and shared with the other authors of the web-research.

³ In a sense, this approach was necessary, even for the uncertainty and the poor knowledge of the context conditions before leaving, which made setting the fieldwork for the mission difficult. The impact and the obvious uncertainties caused by such a radical event as a revolution, and the political tensions in Tunisia at the beginning of 2013 (culminating on 6th February with the political murder of Chokri Belaïd, one of the opposition members of the government) had called the group’s departure into question.

places, events and situations.

Finally, the third level of hybridization implies processing and optimizing the materials collected in the field. Following the I-docs logic, choosing the web is consistent with the general expression of the research and with the intention to spread an experience of geographic research through a public potentially wider than the academic context. At the same time, the web form does not simply represent a space where the different materials can be set and put together.

The web-research instead starts from the assumption that different media have to be mixed and integrated, in a non-linear process that, though not neglecting the other authors' point of view, leaves those who observe free to choose. At this level, hybridization also means that all contents are connected and referring to the others, so that the chosen words may influence the realization of images and the appreciation of the video or vice versa.

3.2 Topics and spaces of the web-research

The choice to deal with the case of Tunis after the so-called Jasmine Revolution is consistent with the flexible and open approach of the whole web-research. Starting in December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, a small village in the southern centre of the country, culminating on 14th January 2011 with President Ben Ali's escape after a great demonstration day in Avenue Bourguiba, and going on in the following months through incessant popular mobilizations, the Jasmine Revolution has actually been considered as the first revolution of the so called Arab Spring, causing a widespread effect that would shortly inspire – though with different procedures, objectives and results – other Arabian countries in North Africa (Egypt, Libya and Syria above all), but also other forms of protest in the world (such as *Occupy Wall Street* in New York, *Occupy London* and *Occupy Movement* in the rest of the world, *Indignados* in Madrid and Barcelona, Gezi Park in Istanbul and so on)⁴.

Apart from the differences in every national case, these revolts have definitely represented a breaking off moment in the political geography of these countries, mainly expressed (or, at least, this is what mostly appeared) in the occupation and reappropriation of the most important public spaces in the main cities by a group of demonstrators (such as streets and squares or power centres).

The hypothesis at the basis of the web-research is that, after some years, public spaces in Tunis still keep the signs and legacy of the revolutionary events, in particular the people's ability of self-organizing and re-appropriating the spaces, a reappropriation expressed through symbols and practices: symbols, since these are the places where the new meaning of citizenship and civil rights, as well as of the emotions connected to the memory of the Revolution and to the previous regime, is being redeveloped; practices, since the post-revolutionary changes in the use and practice of the space are more evident, for instance in the freedom to demonstrate and speak of politics publicly, that was forbidden during the regime.

Describing such a re-territorialisation and re-signification of the public space is complicated; it is a radical and continuously redefined project that involves actors, representations, and different, sometimes conflicting, practices. The impression felt during the mission in Tunis is actually of a "suspended" city (and sometimes a fractured one), where a widespread awareness of having realised a deep change is tangible, together with a marked uncertainty about the future. This characterized the research, complicating a strict organisation of the work, and preventing a linear reading and a synthesis of the developed issues from being reached once the project had come to an end.

As for the choice of the spaces, the web-research concentrated on the main spaces of the city. It was not a stock choice, as the Tunisian revolution was born "out" of the capital, in other cities, in suburban, peri-urban and rural sectors, acquiring its own specific urban character later,

⁴ A wide literature that cannot obviously be referred to in this context has dealt with the origin, the chronology

and the effects of the Tunisian revolution and the Arab Springs (see for Bettaieb, 2011; Gobe, 2012; Puchot, 2012; Saïdi, 2011 for further reference).

in the hardest moments of the conflict and of the demonstration⁵. However, the centre of Tunis and, in particular, the spaces of Avenue Habib Bourguiba, of Place de la Kasbah and the Medina are still the strategic points of the political life in the capital. These are the places where the Revolution was brought to an end, and where the process of post-revolutionary re-territorialisation was stronger.

Avenue Bourguiba, the wide boulevard crossing the modern part of the Tunis centre, was the “theatre” of the most symbolic day in the late history of the country: 14th January 2011. This is the day of the big demonstration that, starting early in the morning and ending late in the evening in front of the Home Office, forced the President’s escape from the country. In the recollections of the people met in Tunis, this date evokes pride and emotion, but also regrets. It is the symbolic date of the liberation of a people that takes destiny into their hands, freeing themselves from a violent, repressive and corrupted regime. But it is also the symbol of an unrepeatable collective unity, that witnessed a whole country move towards a single objective, though experiencing new divisions and conflicts the next day.

The square in the Kasbah is pre-eminently the place of the political power inside the city, the space where it takes shape and demonstrates⁶. It is the spatial expression of the control centre, the place where every decision is taken and power is made evident. But in the days of the Revolution and in the months following the momentous 14th January 2011, the Kasbah became the expression of the revolutionary counter power. The occupation of the wide esplanade by thousands of people coming from every part of the country, lasting several weeks in the months of February and March, prevented the attempts to establish a

continuity government with Ben Ali’s regime from succeeding and allowed the establishment of the Constituent Assembly.

Finally, the Medina is considered the “property” space of Tunis, and physically separates the power citadel (the Kasbah) from the colonial city of Avenue Bourguiba. Despite its lower involvement in the revolutionary events compared to the other spaces, the Medina remains the symbolic, identitary and touristic centre of the city and has a leading role in the process of social and spatial re-signification, as well as in the new urban practices characterising the latest years. In other words, the centre of the city represents the referential space of the web-research for its remarkable importance at a political and symbolic level, and from the point of view of the urban and social practices.

3.3 Navigating the centre of Tunis

In Internet language, the multimedia form of the web allows users “to navigate” the several sites in the centre of the city. In an endless recalling, the virtual space allows for the connection to the different places visited during the fieldwork, the different practices of the public space, the voices of the different social actors that live in it, as well as the different levels of reading and interpreting the town by the different members of the research group. The produced and reprocessed materials – images, videos and texts – flow into a mutual relationship, undermining the conventional hierarchy that the different media take in the research, and acquire new functions. Images and videos, for instance, do not show only what the researchers have observed, didactically, nor have they a mere aesthetic function. On the contrary, they are conceived as instruments of geographic knowledge and have the function of stimulating the critical observation and the spatial analysis. Similarly, texts do not offer a more “scientific” reading of reality than the images, but declare and reveal the “positioning” of the authors towards the city, recording the impressions and the emotions lived during the field mission. All the media are in mutual communication, making the presence of the researchers in the field more explicit: their point of view, the uncertainties, the sense of disorientation, the way of living in the space and to narrate it.

⁵ There could be many other places to be closely observed for a deeper analysis of the developing research: the urban outskirts of the Kram and of La Fayette, of Sidi Bou Said, of the Marsa, of the Bardo area, the university city of the Manouba, the cemetery of Jallaz, the cities of Kasserine and Redeyef.

⁶ The Government Palace lies at the base of the wide cement esplanade of the Kasbah. During Ben Ali’s regime it was used for the big demonstrations in his support.

At the same time, the different media imply a direct dialogue with the visitor of the site and with his freedom to move and visit the centre of Tunis two years after the Revolution. The visitor knows the researcher's point of view, but he can also listen to the interviewees' voices, watch the images and build his own representation of the city and of the developing research.

Once in the site, the visitor is asked to take different decisions on a spatial basis, starting from a map of the centre of Tunis. The centre of the city is divided into three spaces (redefined "rooms"): the Kasbah, the Medina and the Avenue Habib Bourguiba (Figure 1).

Having virtually entered one of these spaces, the visitor is asked to interact with a wide range of possible options for exploration and consultation, both visually and textually (Figure 2).

The videos include the interviews of some preferential witnesses who describe the changes occurring in the space during and after the Revolution, some evidence recorded in the field, shots of particular events caught at random during the stay in Tunis (for instance, political or corporative demonstrations, cultural meetings, sit-ins, etc.) or, more simply, expressions and signs of everyday life that emerge from public spaces.

Similarly, photos portray some particular practices of the public spaces, some sights of the city or more simply the faces of the people met in the street by chance. They also report the presence of the researchers in the field, never invisible, always explicitly present, and interacting with the observed reality. This presence is further emphasized by four editorial-videos (one for each researcher) that, in different ways, express a personal and subjective view about the conducted research.

Finally, the texts are conceived as auxiliary contributions, with no aspiration to be exhaustive or comprehensive of the whole developing research, but, on the contrary, eager to open and suggest new cues for a reading: some aim at dealing with precise specific topics (for example, the explanation of the term "medina")⁷; others with more theoretic and general ones (for instance, a reflection on the

control of the space through the urban project)⁸; some have a more descriptive function (such as the chrono-spatial and symbolic reconstruction of the spatial practices in Avenue Bourguiba)⁹.

Clicking on the link of every media, the visitor is lead to the page dealing with the chosen content. Every media has a title and a concise description of its content. At the bottom of the page, the *tags* allow for access to other contents or spaces linked to the visited one directly and, therefore, to surf the site and the centre of Tunis according to a given topic in a trans-medial procedure (Figure 3).

In this way, listening to Larbi Chourika's political comment, visitors can recollect the route of the big demonstration on 14th January 2011 along Avenue Bourguiba and be thrilled remembering the most dramatic and intense moments in the recent history of Tunisia¹⁰. They can even experience the contradictions of the present taking part in the picket line that, every Wednesday at 1 p.m., occupies the spaces in front of the municipal theatre, claiming justice for the political murder of the opposition leader Chokri Belaïd¹¹. Or listen to the urban planner and historian Jellal Abdelkafi, describing the birth, the architectonic characteristics, the urban development, as well as the social and political role of Avenue Bourguiba he has recently contributed to planning¹². Otherwise, we can move towards the Medina and listen, in shops and cafeterias, to the opinions about life after the Revolution, persuaded that nobody will never deprive the Tunisians of their freedom of speech again¹³, but also be bitterly aware that words are not enough to get by on¹⁴.

⁸ Memoli, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/testi/controllo-medi-na.pdf>.

⁹ Puttilli, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/testi/altra-faccia.pdf>.

¹⁰ Video: "Il 14 gennaio di Larbi Chouraki", <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Av-Bourguiba>.

¹¹ Video: "Ogni mercoledì alle 13", <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Av-Bourguiba>.

¹² Video: "Ogni mercoledì alle 13", <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Av-Bourguiba>.

¹³ Video: "Non si torna indietro", <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Medina>.

¹⁴ Video: "Non si torna indietro", <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Medina>.

⁷ Cattedra R., "Dentro le mura", <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/testi/dentro-le-mura.pdf>.

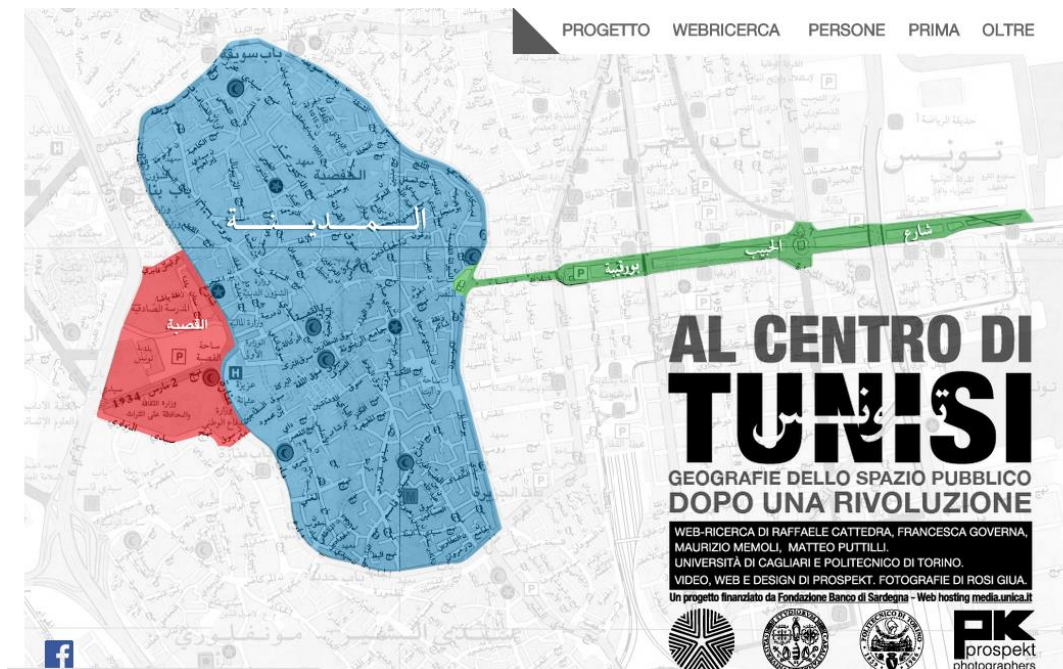


Figure 1. The Italian home page of the web-research and the three spaces of the centre of Tunis.

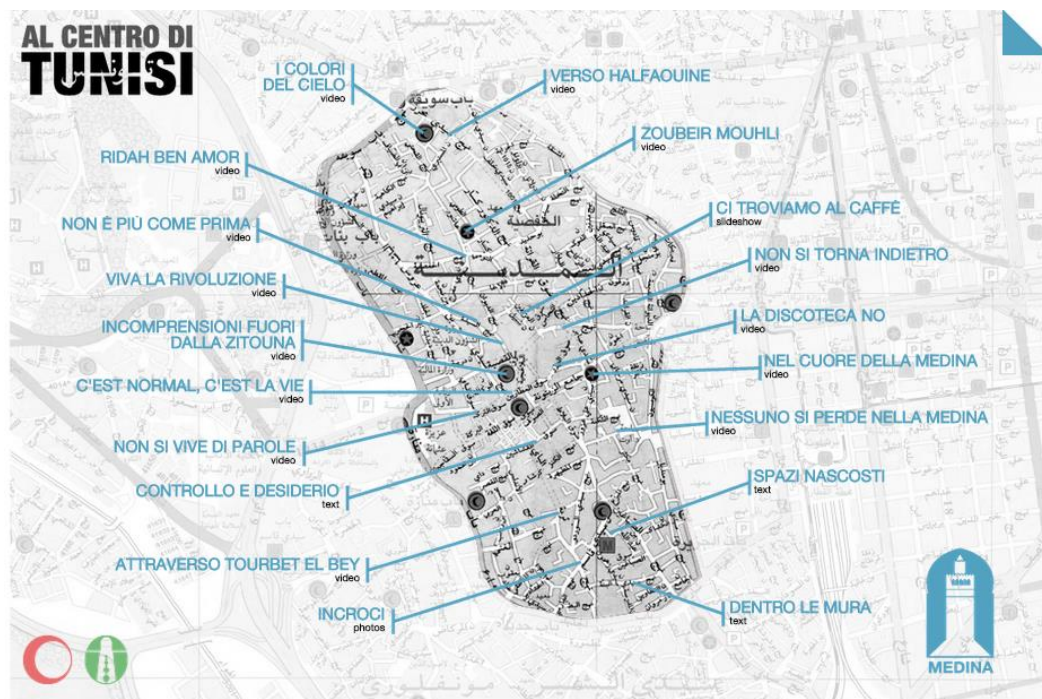


Figure 2. An example of “stanza”: the Medina and its multimedia content.

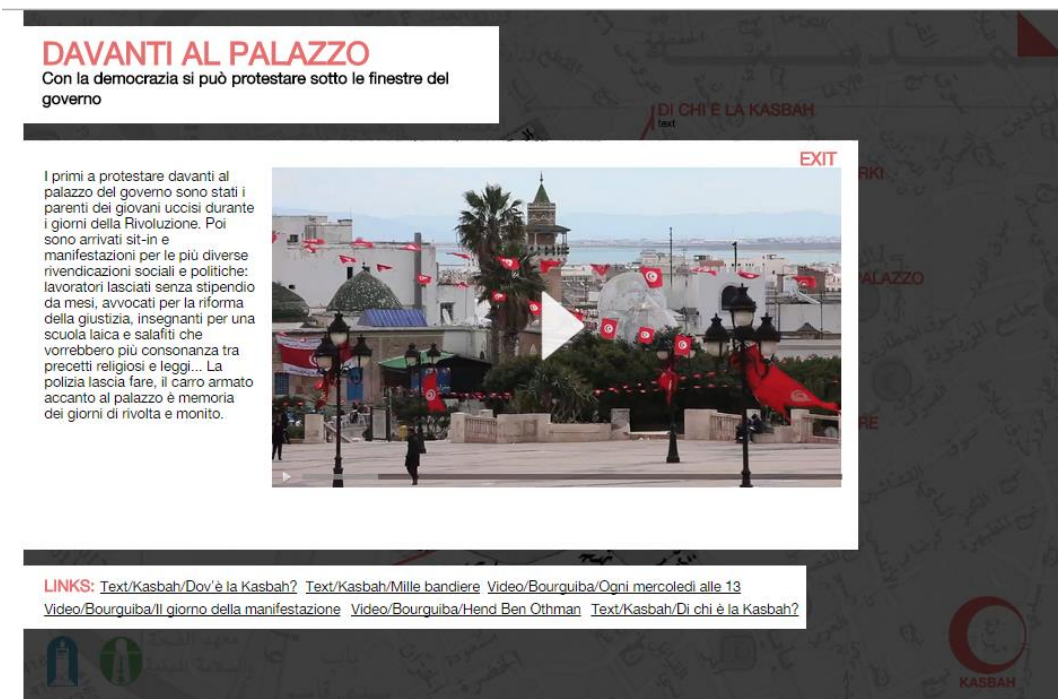


Figure 3. An example of a video within the Kasbah: “Davanti al palazzo”.

These are only some examples of the voices and reading levels (sometimes opposed and radically different), from a more analytical and emotional angle; they allow the user to surf the centre of Tunis and recover, though in the distance, the places and spaces of the Revolution.

After all, an experimental research by definition always implies risks and controversial points of view that cannot be easily solved or properly analysed. In particular, the lack of combined interpretations answering the first question in the research (that is an analysis of the changing use of the public space), the consequent choice to leave multiple interpretations open and the multimedia form might raise an issue about the role of the scientific research, and more specifically the geographic one, compared to other forms of investigation (the journalistic or the media one). In other words, what is the role of geography (and of geographers) in such research if not finding and putting documents and observations together? And thus, what distinguishes a research from a journalistic survey? Is there any risk of being confined simply to evidence and ideography, neglecting the interpretative function?

Apart from the issues that, broadly speaking, deal with the role of geography and social sciences, currently debated at an international level¹⁵, these questions came up rather frequently in the group involved in the web-research in Tunis (geographers or not).

On the one hand, the role of geography emerges from the same setting of the developing research, evidently a spatial one, as well as from the attempt at adopting multimedia techniques to explain transformations and uses of the space, as well as from the texts and the video-editorials where the points of view of the researchers-geographers involved are expressed more clearly. On the other hand, the purpose was to practice a geography that could voice and point out the public space, the people living in it and the events peculiar to it. Beyond the specific professional competences, a geographic view caring for the spatial dimension was aimed at and supported, whether practised by a professional geographer, a video-maker, a journalist or, broadly speaking, any visitor of the web-research through his own biography and specific interests.

¹⁵ For a synthesis and a position on the topic see Governa, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/testi/oltre.pdf>.

4. Learning from (virtual) space

Although “Al centro di Tunisi – Au centre de Tunis” is not a project explicitly conceived for a didactic purpose, like other multimedia projects it has many possible applications in the educational field. The web-research is currently used – and not only by the authors – as a didactic and educational resource at a university level (of course in the context of political and economic geography, developmental geography, urban geography and cultural geography, in particular of the Mediterranean area), especially through workshops and group activities. Starting from these first experiences, we hereby present some synthetic reflections on the educational impact of the research.

Apart from the more specifically multimedia features (whose importance and limits in the educational context have already been described in paragraph 1), the web-research allows for work on some specific geographic contents and competences, exploiting both the issues dealt with and the methodologies adopted by the project. Referring to other sites for a deeper analysis of the problems and competences in geographic education (IGU, 1992) and, above all, for the latest reflections on this subject (Van der Schee, 2012; Morgan, 2013; Stoltman, 2013; MacLeod, 2014; Giorda, 2014), it can be maintained that one of the main objectives of geographic education is the development of the knowledge and the functional ability to read and interpret contemporaneity, the on-going material and immaterial changes in the geographic space at different levels, the links between society and territory.

How can the web-research offer a contribution to the development of these abilities? Which geographic contents emerge from the research? Though not expecting to be exhaustive, three possible lines can be listed for further development, expressing the geographic competences connected to them through some examples.

4.1 Urban geography and education to the analysis of socio-spatial relations

The first line refers to the analysis of the urban changes and the socio-spatial relationships. “Surfing” the centre of Tunis, we are immediately aware of the deep changes that occurred in the space, and, above all, in its practice and representation. Recognizing the spatial changes explains the incessant evolution and transformation of the space, even the physical and apparently neutral one of a city, either visibly or invisibly.

Even in the case of Tunis, the spatial changes are not only connected to the Revolution but also intrinsic in explicit urban policies. The vice-president of the Association for the Safeguard of the Medina Zoubeir Moulhi¹⁶ proves this, describing the projects of requalification and regeneration of the historical area of Tunis that had already been implemented under the regime, aimed at improving the Medina from the cultural and touristic point of view. However, a Revolution obviously exasperates and accelerates transformations, to such a point that “nothing is as it used to be”¹⁶.

The denomination of the places and squares where the revolution has developed is different¹⁷. Attitudes and behaviours in public spaces, starting from the new freedom to speak and protest, are different¹⁸.

The perception of the places and spaces in the city is transformed: as told by Emna, a young girl studying Architecture, met in a café in Avenue Bourguiba, the once frightful buildings symbolizing the repressive power of the regime (like the Home Office, a place for the detention and persecution of political prisoners), that made people turn the other way while walking past them, nowadays are proudly admired as a symbol of the liberation of the country¹⁹.

¹⁶ Video: “Zoubeir Moulhid”, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Medina>.

¹⁷ Video: “Nulla è più come prima”, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Medina>.

¹⁸ Text: Puttilli, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/testi/altra-faccia.pdf>.

¹⁹ Video: “Questo spazio ora è nostro”, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Av-Bourguiba>.

Images represent a powerful instrument to interpret urban transformations. For instance, one of the most recognized spatial “objects” in Avenue Bourguiba is the presence of the barbed wire for the protection of some “sensitive” buildings, such as the French Embassy and the Home Office (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Barbed wire in “protection” of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Photo: R. Giua.

An urban element only apparently temporary and removable, the barbed wire is in reality a constant presence and seems to have acquired permanent or somehow lasting features. It is certainly an element of division and separation, deeply affecting the space, creating suspended and inaccessible places that have been stolen to the practices and the uses involving the remaining part of the city²⁰. Its presence seems to express the weakness of the democratic process and in part to undermine the “revolutionary dream”.

However, changing the image reality can look different (Figure 5). During the field mission at least, the Tunisians seem to be used to avoiding the barbed wire, to bypassing it, to walking close to it and not to touching it, to filling only a piece of the carriageway and walking anyway. The barbed wire, despite it being a symbol of division, seems to have been absorbed in the routine of the streets and of the city.



Figure 5. An example of people’s practice of space despite the presence of barbed wire. Photo: R. Giua.

Therefore, the case of Tunis leads to a reflection on how the urban space is represented, used and appropriated by the social actors and aimed at in a continuous process of changes and transformations.

4.2 Political geography and education to contemporary complexity

The second line refers to the geopolitical dimension and the education to the complexity of reality. The international public opinion at first associated all the “Arab Springs” in the different countries, and classified them as a form of collective re-awakening towards democracy; however, it might be premature, or at least limiting, to consider them as a failure nowadays, since they find it difficult to establish steady governments or to emerge from a state of permanent conflict²¹. As for Tunisia, the legacy of the revolution is a highly complicated political, social and economic condition, if not an openly conflicting one (though not reaching a state of civil war like other countries, particularly Libya and Syria). Understanding the complexity of the contemporary world means educating to the critical thought and to interpreting reality through different points of view, wasting no time in simplistic explanations of facts and spaces.

²⁰ Text: Puttilli, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/testi/altrafaccia.pdf>.

²¹ For a deeper analysis on the different interpretations of the “Arab Springs” by the international public opinion see Ferreri, 2013.

Showing specific situations experienced by the group, the web-research allows for a deeper analysis of some contradictions and contrasts of the post-revolutionary Tunis, through the evidence collected in the interviews or through the observation of the events.

From this point of view, “taking part” in the big demonstration in Avenue Bourguiba for the national day of the martyrs for independence of 9th April²², saddened by incidents and clashes in 2012, becomes really meaningful. In 2013 parades were peaceful but separated: on one side of the boulevard, a shared picket composed of trade unions, the popular Front, the liberals and the radicals; on the other side, in front of the municipal theatre²³, a meeting held by the members of Ennahda, the confessional party in power at that moment and a picket of the Salafi movement, with a more integralistic background (Figure 6). In the middle, a police cordon to separate the participants in the two coalitions of the demonstration. No representation can be more significant than the post-revolutionary political movement in the country.

The public space becomes the stage where the rival political forces confront and mock each other, claiming a right to the square and the street as their own spaces of political achievement. In a role play made of provocations and contrasts but never resulting in violent clashes, the demonstrators often come really close, but never touch, revealing thus how the public space can be used in geopolitical terms to legitimate one's own positions and de-legitimate the others' at the same time.

²² Video: “Il giorno della manifestazione”, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Av-Bourguiba>.

²³ The spaces in front of the theatre represent a real contested site by the different political wings, due to their symbolic value linked to the memory of the revolution. Ennahda claims their own exclusive right to demonstrate in front of the theatre because of the meeting there of their representatives on 14th January 2011. On the other hand, the representatives of the opposition disagree with it claiming that after the Revolution the theatre could become the right site for the progressive and liberal forces assembly.



Figure 6. Pics from the video “Il giorno della manifestazione”: 1. Police and barriers in the center of Avenue Bourguiba; 2. The political meeting of Ennahda in front of the theatre; 3. The parade of liberals, progressives and labor unions; 4. The parade of salafists.

4.3 Social geography and education to cultural diversity

The third line refers to the social geography of Tunis and the education to interculturality. “Al centro di Tunisi– Au centre de Tunis” is a project on cultural differences too. Although they do not represent the core of the research, there are lot of materials recording moments of incomprehension, confusion, disorientation as well as of experience and knowledge of the otherness. For all these “moments”, occurring during the fieldwork, the web-research resorts to the suspension of judgement, of documentation and testimony.

It is thus possible to follow the researchers out of the Zitouna mosque, in the heart of the medina, and get lost in a dialogue made of cultural and linguistic incomprehension between a researcher, an imam’s man, a shopkeeper and a video operator, becoming aware of the little or big difficulties arising in a research mission in a foreign country belonging to a different culture²⁴.

In a sense, for the Italian and European students listening to Myriam, a 23-year-old girl who helps her father in a lingerie and wedding dress shop in the medina may be rather bewildering (Figure 7)²⁵. According to Myriam, as well as for the other young women interviewed during the research work, one of the main successes in the revolution is represented by having defeated the prohibition to wear the headscarf in public places, imposed by Ben Ali’s secularist biased regime. For many women, wearing the headscarf therefore acquires a new meaning: it is certainly worn as a religious symbol of identity and membership, but also as an act of asserting one’s own freedom of expression and religion.

This is a very different meaning from the stereotype of the headscarf as a cultural imposition wielded on the woman’s body, common to a stigmatized view of Islam as a male chauvinist religion. Similarly, Myriam sounds surprising when she reveals she is a supporter of Ennhada, the confessional party of

the government, hoping for the implementation of a moderate Islamic government because, in her words, Islam is democracy. Such an opinion disagrees with some recent reflections that appeared in the European media and in literature, as for the rising of internal conflicts in the Arabian countries like Libya and Syria, and that start to question the supposed incompatibility of Islam with democracy (Maogoto and Coleman, 2013).



Figure 7. “We found freedom in our religion, the freedom to wear the veil”, Myriam says in the video “La discoteca no”.

Fighting against similar issues and getting immersed, even visually, in an urban landscape different from the one we are used to observing (at least in the medina) can contribute to the knowledge and acceptance of different cultures, of those behaviours and social rules whose acceptance differs according to the context, as well as of all those situations, images and also sounds, languages and words perceived by the students as “other” or “distant”, for a further deeper analysis of the motivations, the logic, the sensations of curiosity, unrest and surprise that they can stir up.

5. Conclusions

“Al centro di Tunisi – Au centre de Tunis” represents an example of multimedia geographic research, more or less directly inspired by other multimedia products such as the i-docs but offering, compared to the latter, a different angle of reflection from the methodological and theoretical point of view (at least as far as the geographic research is concerned).

²⁴ Video: “Incomprensioni fuori dalla Zitouna”, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Medina>.

²⁵ Video: “La discoteca no”, <http://webdoc.unica.it/it/index.html#Medina>.

The web-research represents a “virtual” place made up of a combination of characters, relationships, words and emotions. It is an attempt to show the incessant contamination of methods, languages, immersion practices and efforts to understand reality; to research, through explorations and conjectures, the changing twists between facts, values and discussions that make the space meaningful; to try to practice a geography based on a non absolute view of the places, but as an overlapping of different realities, characters and relationships.

For these characteristics and due to its multimedia nature, the web-research is suitable for many applications both in the research and in the educational context, sharing with the other multimedia approaches the possibility to move to an active multimodality, focused on critical analysis, *problem solving* and group work, as well as on a higher emotional involvement than the traditional instruments. At the same time, it is an experimentation to be further fixed, discussed, and better defined, both from the point of view of research methodology and educational perspectives.

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