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Silencing the voice of Bahrain? Regime-critical media and Bahrain's London diaspora

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of a politically mobilized diaspora in the media and politics of Bahrain. The political turmoil of several decades has resulted in the exile of a sizeable community of Bahrainis, and many key activists have settled in London. From here they continue to work with a variety of political activities and a variety of media to put pressure on both Gulf and European regimes. The article traces the development of media forms, from a print newspaper formed out of the diasporic experience, via a particular community-driven homepage opened in Bahrain in 1998, whose creator fled to London after the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprising, to the diversity of the social media that now dominates. In this regard, the role of digital surveillance, and subsequent demobilization and increasing silence, are key to the discussion.

KEYWORDS

Bahrain
regime-critical media
diaspora
politics
activism
demobilization

Since the founding of *Voice of Bahrain/Sawt al-Bahrain*, a bilingual newsletter published from London since 1983, Bahrain's regime-critical media have been closely linked to a Bahraini diaspora, in particular in London. In this article, I will trace the history and development of this connection and relate it to two

aspects in particular. One is empirical and concerns political events in Bahrain, notably the liberalizing reforms of 2001 and the (aftermath of the) uprisings in 2011; the other is thematic and focuses on the development of media forms in Bahrain's (diasporic) political arena: from printed press, via a homepage that was allegedly instrumental in rallying opposition activity before and during 2011, to the current situation, which is dominated by social media that are subversive but also heavily surveilled. I will focus in this article on specific media outlets, namely the newspaper *Al-Wasat* (published in Bahrain 2002–17), the homepage BahrainOnline (running 1998–2018) and then for the current period a wider array of social media, notably Twitter and WhatsApp, which are now the favourite means of communication but at the same time grounds for prosecution and imprisonment for political activists in Bahrain.

The source material for this article was gathered primarily through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in London (and to some extent Denmark) in 2018 and 2019, but also in Bahrain, where I have conducted extensive fieldwork on various topics, mostly before 2011. I will begin the article with some notes on the historical formation of the London diaspora and its ongoing exchange with events in Bahrain. This also involves a brief discussion of theories of diaspora and (social) media. After this I will engage with the three cases of *Al-Wasat*, BahrainOnline and, lastly, the broader social media situation and the relation of online and offline activism among Bahrainis in London today. I conclude with the question whether Bahrain's regime has succeeded in silencing the voice of Bahrain, meaning the voice of political dissent more broadly. The discussion addresses the repression of media within Bahrain, as well as the repression of the diaspora through surveillance of diasporic activity, online and offline, and how this affects the level and kind of activism and (de)mobilization among Bahrainis in the diaspora.

BETWEEN BAHRAIN AND LONDON

London has long been a hub for Bahraini political activists in exile. The first such activists settled in London around the time of the Islamic revolution in Iran. During the 1980s and 1990s, political protest in Bahrain prompted several activists – Shia Islamists as well as secular – to leave the country. Many joined the group in London. In 1999, a new amir replaced his deceased father in Bahrain and launched a series of political reforms, including the reopening of an elected parliament, the release of political prisoners, allowing the return of political exiles, and the liberalization of the press and public sphere. In addition, Bahrain became transformed into a monarchy and the amir became King Hamad. When these reforms were launched, supported on 14 February 2001 in a national referendum on the new constitution, many exiled Bahrainis chose to return to Bahrain. As we shall see below, this included several significant figures from the London-based opposition.

Some, however, did not believe that the reforms were genuine or far-reaching enough, and over the next decade the reforms were the subject of critical debate and much protest among Bahrainis both in and outside the country. This paved the way for Bahrain's participation in what was known in 2011 as the Arab Spring. As in other Arab countries, Bahrainis took to the streets to demand political reforms; as in other Arab countries, the strategy backfired. The limited reforms of 2001 have in effect been rolled back, many political activists have been imprisoned and/or have left Bahrain (and some two hundred have been killed), the window of relatively free speech

has closed, and Bahrain has once again become a very repressive state. Many activists, now from a new generation, went to London, where there is today a thriving community of several hundred Bahrainis. Many of them gather in the Shia community trust Dar al-Hikma, established back in the 1980s as a religious rather than a political centre.¹ It is in and around this centre that I met most of my interlocutors for this article. This is a very active community, forming a diasporic community of (Shia) Bahrainis whose leading minority are also political activists who form a political opposition in exile. As I will show in this article, they use street and media activities, both offline and online, to exert pressure both on Bahrain's regime and on European governments, in particular Britain's, and they have now done so for four decades.

1. The link and division between religion and politics, with Dar al-Hikma as example, will be the subject of another paper within the 'Mediatized Diaspora' project (see *TIFO*, Danish Islamic Studies Journal, forthcoming).

POLITICIZED DIASPORA AND THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF MEDIA

The Bahraini group in London exemplifies very well what many other scholars of diasporas, and of media use among diasporas, have pointed out: that, to use Martin Sökefeld's (2006) constructivist perspective, a diaspora only comes into existence as it is politically mobilized. This perspective adds well to the established criteria for a diaspora, pointing to the (mythological) orientation towards the homeland and the dream of return once the homeland situation improves, if it ever does (Cohen 2008). In an earlier article, Fiona Adamson (2002) has investigated how diasporic groups 'mobilize for the transformation of home', and this is indeed the case with the Bahrainis in London, where the core activists use transnational and in particular social media to work for change in Bahrain, a change that may enable them to return to their home, which they still see as Bahrain. Whether such a change will come about is highly uncertain, and another analytical aim of this article is to look more closely at the dual role of social media. One argument is that they allow individuals to voice their concerns and aspirations and enable people to mobilize from below. An opposite argument, or indeed trend, is, however, that these media provide the means for thorough transnational surveillance by authorities and regimes – as Marc Owen Jones (2013, 2019) has aptly demonstrated in the case of Bahrain and Dana Moss (2018) of Syria. As Marc Lynch (2015) argues, media, and in particular social media, may well be blamed for the failure of the Arab uprisings in general – because regimes have learnt to use these media in their own favour.

The dilemma of social media, caught between participation from below and surveillance from above, has relevance beyond the Middle East and its authoritarian and media-versatile regimes. It is also a general concern about online media and the Internet. Recently, Shoshana Zuboff (2015, 2019) has coined the term 'surveillance capitalism' to highlight the role and level of surveillance and gathering of personal data that the Internet allows, and that big capitalist actors – such as Google, Facebook or Amazon – exploit. Zuboff directly challenges the perspective of another influential author on the 'network society', Manuel Castells (2015), who in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings in the Arab world and many other popular uprisings around the world (e.g. in his native Spain and in the Occupy Wall Street movement) wrote enthusiastically about the potential of 'self mass communication' – broadly Castells' term for social media – for political mobilization and change. This is a big and necessary discussion. What I learnt from my interlocutors in my London fieldwork, but also from my own use of and hesitation about using digital media related

2. In Arabic *Harakat Ahrar al-Bahrain al-Islamiyya*. Note that the Arabic version defines this as an Islamic movement, which is left out in the English version. This is clearly a question of intended audience and support, and something that I will further discuss elsewhere (see note 1 above). I thank Zenia Yonus for reminding me of this difference.

to Bahrain, has led me to believe that Castells (whose perspective in a Middle East context resembles that of Asef Bayat [2010, 2015]) is too optimistic, but by the same token that Zuboff is too pessimistic. Bahrainis in London are at one and the same time deeply aware of the power and danger of surveillance by the Bahraini regime for their peers in Bahrain as well as themselves, yet still insist on using their (social) media platforms to put pressure on that regime, as well as on international, in particular European, public opinion.

I will return to this discussion of surveillance and mobilization, and the question whether the ‘voice of Bahrain’ is being silenced – that is, the voice of Bahraini political activists in the diaspora in general, rather than the *Voice of Bahrain* newsletter. But first I will go back some decades and show how the hitherto most critical official media outlet within Bahrain, the newspaper *Al-Wasat*, was born out of this same diasporic environment.

A REGIME-CRITICAL NEWSPAPER WITHIN BAHRAIN

Al-Wasat (*The Middle*) was founded as one of several newspapers in Bahrain that appeared after the political reforms of 2001. This newspaper, together with *Al-Waqt* (*The Time*), was seen as freer and more independent than others, which were rather closely linked to various parts of the regime. But whereas the short-lived *Al-Waqt* (2006–09), whose editor in-chief was the long-term journalist and intellectual activist Ibrahim Bashmi, had the reputation for being intellectual and perhaps elitist, *Al-Wasat* was a popular voice for the Bahraini masses, in particular for those who had supported the opposition in previous decades, and not least for Shia Bahrainis. Shia Muslims form the majority of Bahrain’s population (although the numbers are fluctuating and debatable, see Gengler 2015; Beaugrand 2016; Hafidh and Fibiger 2019): and as the Shia have long felt marginalized economically and politically, and as the ruling family is Sunni, they form the bulk of the opposition. While particular Shia affairs – ritual events or discussions within the clergy – received little coverage in other parts of the press, *Al-Wasat* sought to find a balance which included both the usual mentioning of what royals and ministers do and think, and the unusual mentioning of what the Shia clergy does and thinks, and what villagers do and think, as well as the events of the Shia ritual calendar. It styled itself not as a voice of political opposition, but as a critical newspaper with a broad interest in what matters in Bahrain. I write in the past tense, because the newspaper was finally closed down in 2017, an end to which I will return below.

The editor in-chief of *Al-Wasat* throughout its existence was Mansur al-Jamri, who I interviewed in Bahrain in 2008 and 2010. Dr Mansur, as he is also known, returned to Bahrain from London in 2001 following King Hamad’s proposed reforms. In London he had been part of the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM),² a broad movement united in its opposition to regime politics but (apparently) with diverse visions of what meaningful reforms would entail. The magazine *Voice of Bahrain*, mentioned above, is still issued by the BFM. Many activists affiliated to this movement chose, like Dr Mansur, to return to Bahrain in 2001. The young and charismatic Shia religious sheikh Ali Salman returned to head the new political society Al-Wifaq (The Accord), which quickly emerged as the most important political opposition bloc in post-reform Bahrain. Another member of the BFM, Majeed al-Allawi, returned to become part of the new government as minister of labour, intending in particular to help young Bahrainis with no *wasta* network

(which allegedly had often helped Sunni Bahrainis to get jobs, promotions and so forth) to secure employment. Meanwhile, the most long-term member and thus arguably the founder of a Bahraini political diaspora in London, Said al-Shihabi, did not want to return. He stayed in London, maintaining the BFM and *Voice of Bahrain* to voice his political protest and distrust of the reforms. As this position once again gained strong support following 2011, Said al-Shihabi remained and is still a key figure in the London diaspora. He has seen many new Bahrainis come to London to form part of a political opposition from there (I will return to this below).

Dr Mansur was a young and high-profile member of this opposition, not least because he was the son of the popular religious cleric and leader of the opposition in Bahrain, Sheikh Abdul Amir al-Jamri (d. 2006). The sheikh had been a member of the first parliament in Bahrain, which existed from 1973 to 1975 shortly after Bahrain's independence from Britain (1971) (see Khuri 1980 for the story of this parliament, including biographies of particular members). In 1994, he was one of the community leaders – Shia, Sunni and secular – who signed a petition for the reinstatement of parliament, opening what was then known as the Bahrain *intifada*. Sheikh Abdul Amir al-Jamri was imprisoned, and his later detention under house arrest was used as a way of negotiating between the regime and the opposition (Khalaf 2000; Louër 2008). For many Bahrainis in the predominantly Shia opposition, the sheikh was seen as their real leader in a sort of shadow cabinet.

Dr Mansur had left for London to study, and stayed there to work with the opposition. He thus had a secular, technical education, whereas his father had studied at a religious seminary (*hawsa*) in Najaf, Iraq, where he was also part of the important Da'wa Shia political movement (Louër 2008: 108). Living in London, Dr Mansur was perhaps also more internationally oriented, and rather than a religious community leader, on his return to Bahrain he turned out to be a rather secular, but religiously tolerant and open-minded figure with an intellectual profile.³

Al-Wasat was immensely popular and was widely disseminated, in particular in the rather marginalized parts of Bahrain often inhabited by Shia Muslims; that is, many areas of the capital Manama, and the many suburbs and villages west of Manama, as well as on the island of Muharraq.

Wikipedia (August 2019) has a page for *Al-Wasat* which notes the high reputation of the newspaper within and outside Bahrain:

The paper was ranked as the top newspaper in terms of circulation and impact in the kingdom of Bahrain by the Pan-Arab Research Center in its survey in 2012. The paper was ranked of the top of index of credibility by the 'Media Credibility Index' issued by Next Century Foundation in London on 5 May 2012. The paper's online version was the 15th most visited [newspaper] website for 2010 in the MENA region.

I do not know who authored this Wikipedia entry, but it is certainly informative. Although 'objective' in the style of an encyclopaedia entry, it is probably more informative than the Bahrain regime would appreciate; thus even an encyclopaedia, in particular one like Wikipedia that is user-driven, immensely influential and accessible, may be seen as a regime-critical medium. Actually, and interestingly, some of the more scholarly activists within the Bahraini diaspora in London have been invited to take training for writing for Wikipedia, something they see as a very important way of getting the story right – in

3. For a discussion of the relationship of secular and religious, and sectarian, positions in Bahrain, see Fibiger (2011).

4. An independent report on events and abuse in Bahrain during and after the uprising of spring 2011, based on an investigation headed by the internationally acclaimed professor of law Cherif Bassiouni (Bassiouni et al. 2011).
5. In the more recent conflict between Qatar and its neighbouring countries since 2017, al-Jazeera has again voiced criticism towards Bahrain. According to my interlocutors, however, this is not out of support for the cause of the opposition, but rather to mock Bahrain as an ally of Qatar's Saudi and Emirati foes.

their view, of course. I therefore quote at length from this entry on *Al-Wasat*: it is simply more accurate and more detailed than my own information, given that I have mostly been away from Bahrain since the 2011 uprising. This is how Wikipedia describes how the events of the 'Arab Spring' affected *Al-Wasat* (abridged for this article, while spellings and hyphens are kept in their uneven original):

On 15 March 2011, the newspaper's printing office was attacked by mobs carrying knives and clubs. This came after recent 2011 Bahraini protests as some pro-government supporters attacked *Al Wasat's* oppositional views on recent events. The attack happened in the early hours of Tuesday morning after days of harassment of staff and journalists by some pro-government supporters.

Following a talk show on Bahrain television on 2 April 2011, which allegedly accused fabrications by the newspaper in its reporting of 2011 protests in Bahrain, *Al-Wasat* was suspended for one day and put under investigation by Bahrain's Information Affairs Authority. *Al Wasat* newspaper was accused of using old footage and articles when reporting on current events following the Bahraini protests [...]

The day after the suspension, the board of directors of the paper announced they had accepted the resignation of Mansoor Al-Jamri as editor-in-chief [...]

Al Jamri spoke to the *Financial Times* following these events and contended that allegations against his newspaper were part of a "sustained campaign" against this specific publication. He explained that there is a possibility of a double agent that was planted in the newspaper to spread fabrications [...]

Karim Fakhrawi, one of the founders of *Al Wasat*, was detained on 3 April 2011 and according to the BICI report⁴ he died under torture on 12 April 2011. The public announcement indicated that Fakhrawi died of kidney failure, but according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, pictures showed bruises on his body.

On 4 August 2011, the board of directors reinstated Mansoor Al-Jamri back as editor-in-chief of the newspaper. The investors' general meeting held on 7 August 2011 reaffirmed the strategic direction of *Al Wasat* newspaper.

In June 2017 the newspaper was banned by the Bahraini government on accusations that it 'sows division'.

This, for now it seems, is the end of regime-critical media within Bahrain, at least in the form of official news outlets such as a printed (and online) newspaper. There never was a regime-critical TV station within Bahrain, where the opposition rather directed their attention to (Shia-based) TV channels in Kuwait, Iraq, Iran and Lebanon and to al-Jazeera in Qatar, which in 2011 and 2012 (particularly in its English version) aired harsh criticism of the handling of the uprising and demonstrators, as well as the lack of attention by the international community, for instance with the widely distributed documentary *Shouting in the Dark* (4 August 2011).⁵ However, both before and since 2011, new forms of media have appeared. Today the regime-critical media scene in Bahrain, both within and outside the country, is dominated by various forms of social media. There was an antecedent for this in the form of user-driven

and 'from-below' websites, not least the site BahrainOnline, to which I will now turn.

BAHRAINONLINE

I owned a website, BahrainOnline, created in 1998. A very popular website, a community website where everyone could post what they thought about and hoped for Bahrain. We received 150,000 hits per day, which is huge in Bahrain.

I met Ali Abdulemam, the creator and owner of BahrainOnline, in London in October 2018. Now in his early forties, he had been living and studying – digital security, of course – in the United Kingdom for 7 years since fleeing Bahrain under the threat of detention in the weeks following the crackdown on the uprising in February 2011. During 2018, with the small group of activists behind BahrainOnline, most now living in London, he had finally taken down the website after some years with no activity there. 'It was active until 2014', he explained to me, 'but people shifted their taste in how they wanted to get their news. Now WhatsApp and Twitter is the main source for news, it is a new generation'. The group is currently working to turn BahrainOnline into an archive to document the mood and sentiments of the Bahrain population in the period from 1998 until after the 2011 uprising.

In 1998, a site such as BahrainOnline was very innovative, both technologically and in its approach to the media. The idea was to make it possible for all Bahrainis to have a voice and to write on the site. This was, in effect, social media before that was invented. The year 1998 was deep in the Bahrain intifada of the 1990s, a period of political uprising and repression that in many ways resembled the post-2011 period in Bahrain, but the young 'digital natives' were apparently ahead of the authorities at that time, and succeeded in running the site anonymously and without interruption.

As noted above, the reforms of 2001 opened up the political and press situation to some extent in Bahrain. BahrainOnline was in some respects a part of this press scene, but it was also targeted for being too opposition and activist. At the same time, while all print media, including the newly established *Al-Wasat* and *Al-Waqt* (see above), had to comply with press law, as a website BahrainOnline could act more independently.

In 2001 and onwards I was managing the website and helping other actors with digital activity. We wanted it to be like a newspaper in Bahrain, and even the King should be able to read it. I know that in several sessions with the Prime Minister and cabinet, it was mentioned [...]

Al-Wasat and *Al-Waqt* were more traditional newspapers, which had to be in compliance with the press law, which was difficult. For example, when the Minister of Information Nabeel al-Hamer sent a memo to all newspapers not to mention anything about Sunni and Shia and discrimination, they couldn't publish it, but we published it.

This was a time of high hopes for a new era of political participation, open discussions and a free press. But soon after the reforms were initiated in 2001, they were reduced, amended and rolled back. This also affected BahrainOnline

and similar subversive outlets for regime-critical groups in Bahrain, which were now experiencing tougher censorship. As Ali Abdulemam explained to me, there were – and as he stated later, there always are – ways of getting around such censorship. But this manoeuvring comes at a price, and he himself was imprisoned several times, most significantly in 2010, prior to his release in 2011 following public and international pressure and his subsequent flight from Bahrain and sentencing in absentia later in that same year.

BahrainOnline was censored since 2002. But there are ways for bypassing the blocking. They tried to censor and block the website several times, but in 2005 I was arrested, because of international pressure I was released after two weeks, in 2010 I was arrested again and put under torture, in 2011 (I was in hiding) but was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in jail, I managed to escape and came to London.

During the uprising itself, even though Ali Abdulemam himself had been in prison since 2010, the website was still running; it was taken over by other activists, in particular, as Ali Abdulemam indicates, activists from London. Other interlocutors in the research project on which this article is based – including those who were in London long before 2011, then returned to take part in the uprising, and also those who had been living in Bahrain but have now settled in the United Kingdom – have told me how BahrainOnline, with their involvement, was the main site for organizing the 2011 uprising. This was the case particularly at the beginning, when people were encouraged to participate in demonstrations, for example, suggesting the Pearl Roundabout as the best possible gathering point. This strategy was clearly inspired by the Tahrir Square camp established during the preceding weeks. Despite the many protests in Bahrain over previous decades, including the 2000s, occupying a central location in the capital was not a strategy known in Bahrain. The Pearl Roundabout was a major infrastructural link between the capital Manama and the suburbs and villages on the north coast of the island. It also made it easier for the demonstrators, most of whom came from the villages (which have experienced social and economic deprivation for years), to get to the scene, since all roads led there. And this idea, allegedly, was promoted on BahrainOnline just days before the uprising started, apparently taking the authorities by surprise so that the demonstrators had time to organize a camp.

The story of this uprising in Bahrain is, in brief, that Bahrain was simmering, inspired by Tunisia and Egypt, and that when President Mubarak resigned on 11 February, this only heightened the mood. A national grand celebration was already planned for 14 February, three days later, for the tenth anniversary of the reform referendum in 2001. The reforms had been supported by an astonishing 98.4% of the citizen body (a figure that most Bahrainis I have talked to actually believe, more or less); but the 10 years of disappointment that followed the referendum had led the opposition to call for protests against the anniversary, and these protests would no doubt have taken place even without any 'Arab Spring' movement. But with the mood that swept across the Arab world in those weeks, people were ready to take to the streets. When one young man was killed by police forces that day – a rare incident in Bahrain – this further increased the call for protest. As another interlocutor in London explained, that protestor's funeral was followed by a massive crowd, and when the funeral was over people thought – now what? In the following

extract, my interlocutor explains how this developed through BahrainOnline, where the suggestion to stage a protest at the Pearl Monument was launched.

Someone had gone and done a field survey of three different sites, so they would give the pros and cons, as options for where the site of protests can be [...] The first site was the Pearl Monument site and the pros and the cons and he went up and took aerial photos of the place. So you have this study, and it was all online and the people were anonymously discussing [...] The Pearl Monument was the best point because it had access from every side, it had very close Shia villages around it. [...] Unanimously everyone decided that was the best. They didn't have to announce that was the place, but people were just logging in and just reading the program, and my God they are planning this, you know. There was no visible leader, no one knew who this guy was [...]. So then what happened was at the 14th of February someone got shot, Ali Mushaima, and then the next day they had the funeral, and in that funeral procession there was so much anger, it was lots of coincidences coming together. So there was no plan to go to the Pearl Roundabout, but when this guy died, in the procession, in Jidhafs and Sanabis and Deih, which is one kilometre away from the Pearl Roundabout, 50,000 people show up to the funeral, they bury him, what do you do next? Everyone felt, like in a complete [...] process, okay let's head to the Pearl Roundabout, so everyone was just walking to the Pearl Roundabout, there was no leadership, everyone just did it, and I was walking with them, people left their cars and they just started walking down and when they got to the Pearl Roundabout it was empty, there was actually no security.

So, mobilized by way of BahrainOnline, the camp was established that day. It was first attacked in the morning two days later (17 February), leaving some casualties and raising fears of a harsh crackdown. But surprisingly the security forces withdrew, and the camp was re-established and was allowed to remain in place for one more month, until forces from the so-called Gulf Peninsula Shield, largely Saudi, crossed the Saudi-Bahrain causeway in support of the Bahraini forces. Then the camp – and eventually the roundabout as such – was totally demolished (for more on this story see Matthiesen 2013; Fibiger 2017).

Shortly after this, Ali Abduleman, the creator of BahrainOnline, left Bahrain. Others stayed, and either continued blogging anonymously, or could not continue. There had also been some divisions within the group, as well as within the opposition as such, as to the strategies and aims of the uprising. Was the aim reform of the regime or the end of the regime? (The popular call at the beginning of the uprising in Bahrain was for reform, not for the end of the regime as in Tunisia and Egypt). Was the aim a republic, and if so, was this an Islamic republic?⁶ According to some interviewees who were involved in BahrainOnline at the time but later distanced themselves from the mainstream opposition, the idea of calling for a republic originally came from the London opposition. These views support the idea that the London opposition was out of tune with the mood among Bahrainis, in particular with what strategies would work best for the opposition. 'Me and others, we were born and bred in Bahrain. We understand the sentiments. If you are from outside, you don't', as one of them put it. Now, however, he and many other activists are

6. A content analysis of the messages and discussion on this website would demand access. At the time of fieldwork and writing this was not possible due to the process of archiving the website. This could be an idea for future research.

7. Other examples of such NGOs are Salam and BIRD (Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy), also based in London. They are both focused on human rights and thus more traditional NGOs.

all outside Bahrain. For many of them, the struggle for reforms and change in Bahrain goes on from here, but in new ways.

Ali Abdulemam, my main interlocutor in this section and the creator and owner of BahrainOnline, explained how he is now mainly working as an adviser and consultant to others confronted by problems with digital security – both in and outside Bahrain – but also how he works with NGOs on the situation in Bahrain:

At that time we were the revolutionary in technology, by now we are getting old. Now I work with digital security. If some in Bahrain have problems with digital security they can contact me. People can contact me by Twitter [...] I [also] work with NGOs outside Bahrain, there are no NGOs in Bahrain, because of the situation, they are dissolved or not active.

A particular NGO he works with, and a striking example of an internationalized and research-based NGO that is not directly political but still targets the Bahraini regime, is Bahrain Watch, which is based in London.⁷ The core members of this group include not only Bahraini but also British, United States and Pakistani nationals, though all have some relation to Bahrain. The NGO surveys Bahraini government programmes and spending, such as purchases of arms and security equipment. Some of their most influential revelations have been those of Bahrain's purchase of tear-gas from South Korea and digital spyware from Israel (for a bigger picture of arms trade between in particular the United Kingdom and the Gulf countries, see Wearing 2018). That Bahraini activists had reported from South Korea made it into the press in Bahrain, which otherwise ignores any voices of the opposition. According to one of the persons involved in London, one pro-government journalist in Bahrain lamented that the diasporic activists 'are active in five continents' and asked for more resources from Bahrain's government to counter the apparently international appeal of these opposition narratives.

More relevant to this article is the trade in spyware, which has rendered the Bahraini authorities very well equipped and up to speed with the newest technology. If the youngsters behind BahrainOnline back in the 1990s were savvy first-movers who could therefore launch their news and get behind the wall of censorship, they now operate against fierce competition from well-funded and highly alert government agencies.

I will end this article by discussing the role of social media; in particular how having been an asset to the opposition both within and outside Bahrain, they have become a liability, heavily feared as a medium for surveillance within Bahrain and abroad.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SURVEILLANCE AND PERSISTENCE

Summing up from the two cases above, in the course of 2017 and 2018 the newspaper *Al-Wasat* closed down because of repression within Bahrain, and likewise the formerly so important website BahrainOnline disappeared from the Internet because, as the co-founder put it, people now prefer other media forms and outlets. These are primarily the new social media such as Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram, three outlets which many of my interlocutors – diaspora Bahrainis in London and Denmark – cite as the most important sources of news from Bahrain and for keeping in touch with both the political

situation and, not least, friends and family in the country. While my interlocutors in London and Denmark still seem able to get the information they want from Bahrain, many have noted that social media activity is dwindling and that people have become more cautious in their online activities. As one of the long-term political activists in London put it:

Until three years ago you would get all the information on social media, but now nobody can write, if they write they go to jail, three years, four years, five years. But we have our people inside, who send us information by email, this is how we get information for news. On Twitter I read good news... [...] I try not to communicate with [people] inside. I try not to speak. If I speak to someone they will get arrested.

The London activists need to be careful how they get in touch with their peers in Bahrain, because people there may get in trouble for being connected to the Bahraini political group in London. The same fear has also prompted many Bahrainis in the diaspora to refrain from getting involved in political activities, or from association with particular activists. In Denmark, for example, I heard that when a WhatsApp group was set up to link the small community of Bahrainis there, some had directly questioned whether particular persons should be included in this online group because they were well-known political activists who might endanger the whole community, in particular the families in Bahrain. People fear for themselves and their families at home, and the connectivity of online social media, and the traces that such media activity leaves, have turned from an asset into a liability. As noted earlier in this article, Jones (2013, 2019) has reported on digital surveillance and counteractivism by the Bahraini and other Gulf regimes, as has Moss (2018) for Syria. More generally, Zuboff (2019) points to the crucial importance of Internet surveillance in contemporary global society. Although primarily focused on Syria, Moss also mentions – building on a 2014 report on the Bahrain Watch website – how Bahraini authorities intend to ‘track and monitor the “every move” of political refugees in Britain through their computers and mobile phones’ (Moss 2018: 268). Awareness of this intention has roused fears that not only those in Bahrain may be targeted, but those outside it as well.

One of the most notable Twitter accounts within Bahrain during and after the 2011 uprising was that of Nabeel Rajab (again, according to his Wikipedia entry, this account is ‘ranked number 1 in Bahrain’). Rajab’s case is also one that has taught Bahrainis in and outside the country to be careful with their social media activity. Rajab is a long-term human rights activist who appeared as one of the leaders of the 2011 uprising. He communicated intensively via in particular Twitter and Facebook. In 2012 he was detained and convicted for his regime-critical tweets. First he was sentenced to three years, which was later reduced to two due to international pressure; then, released in May 2014, he was arrested again in October the same year following new tweets. Sentenced this time to 6 months in prison, he was pardoned by the King in an attempt to reach out to the Bahraini community. But Rajab was convicted once again in 2017 and sentenced to two years in prison for ‘disseminating false news, statements and rumours about the internal situation of the kingdom that would undermine its prestige and status’, clearly pointing to the international profile and dissemination of his Twitter account. In 2018, still active on Twitter (through his wife), he received another 5-year sentence because of tweets about the war in Yemen and criticism of Saudi Arabia, something that is

also deemed unlawful in Bahrain. Rajab's was one of the cases, and the most highly profiled, that my interlocutor is referring to in the quotation above. Several other interviewees have referred to this particular case, and note in general that they now follow the situation in Bahrain less intensively than they used to. This is in part because of the surveillance. Most recently (from what I know), in May 2019 a new law was issued in Bahrain specifically targeting WhatsApp groups: if regime-critical sentiment is voiced in a WhatsApp group, the individual who started (owns) the group can face prosecution, even if he or she has voiced nothing themselves. Over and above this fear of surveillance and prosecution, this silencing effect also stems from the feeling among Bahrainis in the diaspora that they cannot do anything to change the situation, and that when they follow what is going on, they only feel ashamed that they can do nothing – or feel obliged to do something. For example, an interlocutor in Copenhagen who was active in the 2011 uprising and after some time in prison had returned to Denmark, where she had grown up as a second-generation migrant from Bahrain, told me how she had come to dislike talking to people in Bahrain – by phone, WhatsApp or other means:

I get scared sometimes when we talk, I don't talk very freely to them. So when I was in Bahrain I was not talking very freely, because I felt it was threatening me, but when I am sitting here I am just really afraid of being vocally anti-regime, on WhatsApp for example, saying something, because I am always conscious that the phones might be bugged, that the government knows everything and that they get in trouble. So we try to keep it like, it is mostly just social, talking about everyday stuff, not very political.

Do you talk with others than family?

Most of the people I knew and are very close to are in prison. So no. Sometimes I would get a phone call from prison, but it is very difficult for me to talk to people who are in prison.

Okay, to avoid making any problems for them?

Not only that, I feel guilty, and when I talk to them I don't know what to say. There are a lot of people who are very young and sentenced to 160, 170 years in prison, and I have nothing to say to them that I feel can give them hope.

This mood of demobilization (Davenport 2015; Yonus 2019) is arguably a sign of defeat for Bahrain's regime-critical media. It is a significant factor in the silence that, in Bahrain in particular, seems to be the new order (Fibiger 2018). But the core activists in London keep on going, and keep up their level of activities, not least because of that very obligation referred to above by others. In London you can do something; in Bahrain, you cannot. As one interviewee emphasized: '[w]e make the news'. The news is produced in London, not in Bahrain itself.

I will end this article by providing a few brief examples of the diversity of activities, both online and offline, carried out in London during the period of my fieldwork for this project alone, that is, in 2018 and 2019. These show that Bahrain's London diaspora is far from silenced. In fact, it is apparently in London that a loud part of the voice of Bahrain's opposition resides.

'WE MAKE THE NEWS'

Every Wednesday and Saturday a group of Bahrainis meet in London to demonstrate against the Bahraini regime, its repression and mistreatment of prisoners, and international support for the regime. On Wednesdays they meet in front of the Saudi Embassy, on Saturdays in front of the British prime minister's residence in Downing Street – because, as one of the organizers of these weekly events explained, Bahrain is heavily dependent on both Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom, and because the embassy of Bahrain has been moved to a rather quiet location where few people would note the demonstration. The numbers of participants in these demonstrations (in which I have not taken part, both for fear of my own surveillance and to maintain my research integrity) have gone down; now usually only a handful of Bahrainis meet for these events, but 'we believe that if we knock on the door again and again, eventually it will open', as I was told. However, on particular occasions larger groups, including both Bahraini and Arab and British supporters, meet for demonstrations outside Bahrain's embassy. This was the case on the anniversary of the 14 February uprising and on other significant dates in the Bahraini political calendar, and also in connection with particular incidents such as the execution of two young prisoners in July 2019. On 24 August – while I was drafting this article – I received WhatsApp messages from Bahraini activists in London, reporting from a demonstration that day in front of Bahrain's embassy that was described as organized by 'Bahrain's Opposition Bloc and a number of human rights organizations'; the poster title also stated, 'in solidarity with hunger strikers in Bahrain'. Such events involve speeches from key members of the diasporic community, in particular the Bahraini NGOs in London (and the pictures from this most recent one also show non-Bahraini speakers). They often also involve press conferences, even events in the British parliament organized with British MPs. With the exception of the more technically and research-oriented Bahrain Watch mentioned above, the most important among these NGOs are BIRD – the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy – and Salam, working specifically on the issue of deprivation of citizenship, which many Bahrainis abroad have experienced. The demonstration of 14 February 2019, at which time I was in London and briefly passed by, was filmed in its entirety (probably also from inside the embassy, but this I do not know about) and was put on the YouTube channel Bahrain al-Youm, which is also the site for documenting many other activities by the London group. Likewise, the underground TV station Lulu TV – established after 2011, its name specifically referring to the Pearl Roundabout centre of the uprising – broadcasts from these events and interviews key speakers. Lulu TV first operated from London, but now primarily from Lebanon, though many interviews and stories are still featured from the London group. These are intended for the Bahraini community in and beyond Bahrain, and for an Arab community more generally (and there is an English version of the Lulu TV website for the international community as well [lualuatv.com]).

One particular story during this period was Ali Mushaima's hunger strike, carried out for 63 days during August and September 2018. The hunger strike was in support of his father, Hassan Mushaima, a long-term activist and leader of the Al-Haq movement, who has been imprisoned since 2011 and is suffering from poor health and harsh prison conditions. This one-man demonstration (often accompanied by other Bahrainis) was carried out on the very doorstep of Bahrain's London embassy, showing the fine line separating

8. The line between the premises of the embassy and British jurisdiction was breached on 29 July 2019, when one Bahraini activist climbed onto the roof of the embassy (via scaffolding next door) in an attempt to create attention to the scheduled execution of two prisoners in Bahrain later the same night. The activist was taken down by embassy guards, but was then carried out of the embassy by British police breaking into the embassy, fearing for 'a second Khashoggi' as suggested by activists on the ground in front of the embassy. I plan to use and expand on this case, and the fine line between the embassy and Britain, in another article, based on my presentation at the conference 'Digital Fortress Europe', Brussels, October 2019.

what is possible on the two different sides of the door to these premises. Ali Mushaima's story was broadcast widely by social media, by Lulu TV, and also by British media such as *The Guardian*, which featured a letter written by Ali Mushaima himself to explain his cause.⁸

There is thus a wide range of offline and online political activism among the Bahraini diaspora in London, intended to show support for the cause of Bahrain's opposition both in Bahrain and abroad, to put pressure on the regime in Bahrain, and to inform public opinion in Europe, in particular Britain. These activities – offline and online – are much more possible today outside Bahrain than inside, and, therefore, people feel an obligation to keep going: to keep knocking on the door, as one interviewee put it above. Surveillance, demobilization and silencing are one side of the story of regime-critical media in Bahrain; continuing activism and the sense that 'we make the news' are the other.

The lessons to be learnt here do not only pertain to Bahrain, let alone the Middle East. If Zuboff's critique of 'surveillance capitalism', as noted earlier in this article, is pessimistic about the digital power of algorithms, surveillance and control, Zuboff herself ends her book with hope for a future in which people will act against this digital surveillance by saying 'No More' to the digital sphere (Zuboff 2019: 525) and living their lives in the physical, face-to-face world. The Bahraini activists in London have shown that such offline activities are of crucial importance, but also that offline and online activism come together: through their offline activities, as demonstrated above, Bahrainis in London aim to put physical – real-life – pressure on public opinion and leading politicians in Britain, as well as to show support for their brethren in Bahrain and the Arab world by digitally distributing their activism. If digital media activity is a double-edged sword – used against, but also by the regime – the offline activism on which that digital activity is based may actually produce real political change.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, therefore, the voice of Bahrain, meaning the voice of a regime-critical media, has not been silenced. It may be marginal; but with the exception of the newspaper *Al-Wasat*, within Bahrain it has always been a rather marginal part of the media scene. In the wake of the ill-fated uprising of 2011, and in particular since the closure of *Al-Wasat*, regime-critical media in Bahrain are again primarily based in the diaspora, not least in London. This, however, is something of which the regime in Bahrain has always been very aware, since the establishment of the Bahrain Freedom Movement and its *Voice of Bahrain* newsletter in the early 1980s. In recent years, the regime has acquired increasing technological means for surveillance of the online activities that are crucial to the dissemination of public protest from diasporic centres such as London. This troubles Bahrainis there, and increases the costs – the consequences for oneself and for one's contacts within Bahrain – of online media activity. The aim of the regime is to silence regime-critical media, to silence the critical voice of Bahrain. Here they have had increasing success, not only within Bahrain but also in the diaspora. But their objective is still countered by a persistent mobilization and activism among Bahrainis in London, who see their own activism, online and offline but always disseminated online, as their only means of provoking political pressure and change.

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