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SOCIAL MEDIA, SURVEILLANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN THE BAHRAIN UPRISING

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This is a study of how the Bahraini regime and its supporters utilized Facebook, Twitter and other social media as a tool of surveillance and social control during the Bahrain uprising. Using a virtual ethnography conducted between February 2011 and December 2011, it establishes a typology of methods that describe how hegemonic forces and institutions employed social media to suppress both online and offline dissent. These methods are trolling, naming and shaming, offline factors, intelligence gathering and passive observation. It also discusses how these methods of control limit the ability of activists to use online places as spaces of representation and anti-hegemonic identity formation. While there is considerable research on the positive role social media plays in activism, this article addresses the relative paucity of literature on how hegemonic forces use social media to resist political change.

KEYWORDS

Bahrain, Facebook, social control, social media, surveillance, Twitter

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On 14 February 2011 thousands of pro-democracy activists took to the streets of Bahrain to demand political and social reform. While such unrest is not new, the sheer scale was unprecedented, as was the brutality of the crackdown, which as of 16 April 2012 has resulted in the death of up to 76 people (Bahrain Centre for Human Rights – BCHR, 2011) and the incarceration of an estimated 2929 (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry Report – BICI, 2011: 409). Despite initial support for the pro-democracy activists among both Sunni and Shia (Ulrichsen, 2011), the resulting crackdown has led to the increased polarization of Bahraini society. This is now primarily articulated along a pro-government versus anti-government divide, and the question ‘Are you pro- or anti-government?’ has become both a conversation starter and, inevitably, a conversation stopper.

Irrespective of political stance, both government supporters and activists alike turned to social media and the internet to follow unfolding events. The number of Twitter users in Bahrain shot up (*Al-Wasat*, 2011), and dozens of Facebook groups materialized, the majority of which were posting updates, information, photos and events related to the revolution. Indeed, media coverage of the Arab spring tended to popularize the social media aspect of the struggle, with many news outlets focusing on the role of Twitter and Facebook in the revolutions. Much of their discourse subscribed to the ‘technological utopian’ position, which views social media and the internet as a positive force that democratizes information, reinvigorates citizens’ political engagement, encourages freedom of expression and brings people together (Castells, 1996; Grossman, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Saco, 2002).

Others were somewhat cynical, arguing that social media were merely a tool, and not necessarily integral to the efficacy of the revolutions as whole. Few, however, fully assumed the ‘technological dystopian’ or ‘Neo-Luddite’ position, which posits that technological developments such as the internet simply serve to ‘confound the problems of space, access and interaction by alienating people from each other and even themselves’ (Saco, 2002: xv). In addition to fears that technology may actually work against integration, the dystopian position describes the fear that Web 2.0 technologies may be used to as part of the ‘informational-control continuum’, and thus shape media content through ‘propaganda, psychological operations, information intervention, and strategic public diplomacy’ (Bakir, 2010: 8). The dystopian potential of technology has recently been examined by Evgeny Morozov (2011), who highlights the failure of cyber-utopians to predict how authoritarian regimes would use the internet as a tool for propaganda, surveillance and censorship.

The internet cannot be reduced to a simple dystopian versus utopian binary, however. Instead, one must acknowledge that it can work simultaneously as a tool of both empowerment and control – depending on who is using it and what objectives they are seeking to achieve. As Rebecca MacKinnon (2012: 27) states:

People, governments, companies, and all kinds of groups are using the Internet to achieve all kinds of ends, including political ones.... Pitched battles are currently under way over not only who controls its [the internet’s] future, but also over its very nature, which in turn will determine whom it most empowers in the long run – and who will be shut out.

Examining the nature of these 'pitched battles' on a case-by-case basis is a useful endeavour, as temporal and contextual factors influence the manner in which the internet and social media are used. This statement is not an implicit rejection of technological determinism, but rather an acknowledgement of the importance of social constructivism, which is important in examining the influence of power relations and socio-historic factors in influencing internet use (Franklin, 2004). In this respect, regional case studies can help us determine the uses and outcomes of social media in specific cultural and political environments. How social media is used in Bahrain might differ markedly from how it is used in Egypt for example.

Given that the uprising in Bahrain has not succeeded in achieving regime change, it makes sense to focus on how hegemonic forces have utilized social media to subjugate both dissent and dissenters in the months following 14 February. This article therefore focuses more on the dystopian potential of technology, and looks at how social media, and in particular Twitter and Facebook, have assisted the Bahraini government, hegemonic institutions and those representing the hegemonic order in maintaining their position of dominance. In particular, it examines how hegemonic forces use social media for the purposes of surveillance, censorship and propaganda. The results are arranged according to the following typology: trolling, naming and shaming, offline factors, intelligence gathering and passive observation.

This article concludes by discussing how attempts to marginalize dissent in cyberspace mirror similar processes in urban space, which are aiming to render public spaces in Bahrain ahistorical, safe and generic. These processes, which range from the destruction of Shia mosques to the demolition of the Pearl Roundabout, all represent attempts to limit the ability of 'resistance identities' to flourish through the evisceration of both symbols and places (Castells, 2004). Indeed the uprising in Bahrain is also a war on symbols, one which is being fought in both cyberspace and urban space in an attempt to limit the existence of what Foucault (1986) described as heterotopias, that is, places that challenge 'safe space' and allow for the flourishing of new, potentially dangerous identities that challenge the existing order. These heterotopias, which are spaces of crisis, deviance, abnormality and transformation (Kern, 2008: 105) embody a threat to the production of safe space if they are unregulated and uncontrolled. Political protest, which by its very nature poses a challenge to hegemonic order, appropriates space and in it creates crisis and abnormality. Thus the control of space, whether it be urban space or cyberspace, is fundamental to ensuring the longevity of any authoritarian regime.

Space, Surveillance and Control

Ever since the internet arrived in Bahrain, it has been used by political activists as a space for resistance. Forums such as bahrainonline.org were used to post photos of rallies and acts of government oppression carried out by the state security apparatus

(Desmukh, 2010). Since the start of the protests all of these forums have assumed either a pro- or anti-government identity. In a very real sense, Bahraini cyberspace has become segregated. This segregation is not formalized, yet the nature of interactions in Bahrain's forums is very much based on political and social loyalties, and as such there are often implicit expectations of what one should and should not say.

Twitter, however, is a different format, and its functionality made it an extremely useful tool in the Arab spring. The surge of users generated by protests on the street resulted in a proliferation of interactions online, the basis of which was often the political context that inspired the user to join. Unlike forums however, Twitter is not a closed community. As a result, interactions between those of opposing opinions and political allegiances are not restricted. On the contrary, they are common. In Bahrain, the resulting interactions were often characterized by volatility, hostility and aggression. Despite these aspects, Twitter is perhaps the most effective place for activists and Bahrainis to communicate in real time with both local and global actors who might be outside their immediate networks. This is especially important in light of the state's tight control of the national media, which increased during the 2011 crackdown. Indeed, the regime temporarily closed down *Al-Wasat*, which was the only Bahraini newspaper that was remotely critical of the regime. Its editor Mansoor al-Jamri was charged by the general prosecutor for publishing false information that 'harmed public safety and national interests' (Trade Arabia, 2011). Opposition figures have also been excluded from the state media, which creates 'frustration ... and results in these groups resorting to other media outlets such as social media' (BICI, 2011: 422).

This inability to seek representation through official media outlets inevitably increases the importance of digital spaces and social media. This was especially apparent following the declaration of the National Safety Law in Bahrain on 15 March 2011 (Bahrain News Agency, 2011). The law, which was the precursor to a broader crackdown, saw the destruction of important political and religious structures, as well as a clampdown on public gatherings of any sort. Examples of this include the demolition of the Pearl Roundabout, which was Bahrain's 'freedom square' and the symbolic location of the uprising. In addition to this, at least 30 Shia religious structures were torn down. While the government claimed that the buildings were illegal, 'five of them had both the requisite royal deed and building permit' (BICI, 2011: 328). In all cases, the government of Bahrain 'did not follow the requirement of the national law concerning the notice and issuance of a judicial order for demolition' (BICI, 2011: 328). Instead, it simply relied on the National Safety Law, which essentially gave *carte blanche* to carry out repressive measures in the name of national security.

The demolitions symbolize the destruction of important representational spaces for Bahraini activists, many of whom are members of the country's Shia community – a community that, despite being the majority, has long been marginalized politically and

economically (Cordesman, 1997; Khouri, 1980; Shanahan, 2008). Having said that, the uprising included both Sunnis and Shia, and consequently represented a major threat to the Al-Khalifa regime, who are never more fearful than when both sects come together to unilaterally oppose specific policies or measures (Khouri, 1980). Despite the government's attempts to paint the uprising as a Shia-inspired, foreign-backed sectarian coup, the demolition of such structures seems to be indicative of sectarianism among Sunni hardliners in the loyalist camp. The destruction and regulation of public space illustrates an attempt to marginalize resistance and dissent. By regulating and exercising control over urban spaces the regime are eliminating important spaces in which identities of resistance can form.

The same is true of digital spaces, which are new frontiers for activism, and are the location from which people can challenge the homogenizing power of authoritarianism. In order to counter the threat embodied by these digital spaces, the Bahraini government and those representing the hegemonic order are employing tactics to control them. These tactics are numerous, yet can generally be seen under the umbrella of 'surveillance', for they are all attempts to instil normative and acceptable repertoires of behaviour through both observation and creating a fear of observation.

Surveillance versus Sousveillance

Surveillance is the process by which organizations and governments observe individuals or groups of individuals. It is an asymmetric process that affords power to the observer but not the observed, and is therefore a process by which the surveiller asserts his domination over the surveilled. The means by which an organization conducts surveillance is multifaceted, yet technological developments have facilitated the speed and efficacy of the process, allowing for more efficient and pervasive observation. Indeed, the rise of what Jan van Dijk (1991) first termed the 'Network Society' has given both organizations and the state unprecedented opportunities to carry out surveillance. As Lyon (2001) argues, the information society is also the surveillance society.

The historical role of technology in surveillance is perhaps most famously illustrated by Bentham's Panopticon, a buildings whose geometry allowed a prison guard to watch the inmates without them knowing. Timothy Mitchell (1991: x) describes the Panopticon as the 'institution in which the use of coercion and commands to control a population was replaced by the partitioning of space, the isolation of individuals, and their systematic yet unseen surveillance'. Mitchell's (1991) work on Egypt draws heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, who outlined the importance of the power differential within the context of the 'unseen'. Ben and Marthalee Barton (1993) summarize Foucault's (1983) argument, stating that the 'asymmetry of seeing-without-being-seen is, in fact, the very essence of power', and the 'power to dominate rests on the

differential possession of knowledge'. As well stressing the importance of asymmetry, Foucault states that: '[the] major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (1977: 201). He adds that surveillance should be 'permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' (1977: 201). In other words, it is not just being watched that is enough to induce obedience to authority, but rather the possibility of being watched.

An example of such an apparatus could be seen in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, where a mosque with an unusually high minaret was built in order to keep track of the Shia in Karbala (Bakir, 2010, 17). The Hassan mosque, itself a modern-day Panopticon, functioned alongside a highly repressive state intelligence apparatus (*mukhabarat*), which is a common presence in the majority of Middle Eastern countries. Bahrain is no exception and, although it is a liberal state by regional standards with fewer restrictions on internet access (Hofheinz, 2007: 60), it still suffers from many of the same repressive measures that serve to limit both dissent and political mobilization. Even before 14 February Bahrain had blocked websites deemed to be politically controversial and arrested on a number of occasions the well-known blogger Ali Abdulemam (Desmukh, 2010).

This censorship indicates the threat that new technologies pose to regimes around the world. They must therefore adopt new methods of observation, ones that preferably permit coercion with minimal resort to violence. While such observation was traditionally carried out via the naked eye, 'surveillance techniques have increasingly become embedded in technology' (Mann et al., 2003). Oscar Gandy (1993) and Mark Poster (1990) argue that the growth of information technology and databases has led to an asymmetrical monitoring of behaviour. This surveillance allows particular organizations, whether they be corporate or bureaucratic to 'not only commodify the personal information of those observed, but also use such information to inform practices of social control and discrimination' (Humphreys, 2011: 576). Facebook and Twitter are therefore a potential opportunity for organizations to extract information which can be used to further the agenda of the particular institutional body collecting the data.

So, just as the Panopticon allowed the asymmetric observation of a prison's inmates, the modern-day neo-Panopticon (Mann et al., 2003: 332) can be seen as the use of observational technologies to discourage certain forms of behaviour in a wide range of places, from malls to high streets, to forums and social media. While the essence of this surveillance is based on the fact that it is asymmetrical, the use of new technologies by individuals to observe those in authority represents a sort of inverse Panopticon, one where citizens can challenge the government's monopoly on information (2003: 333).

This idea is described as 'sousveillance', 'from the French words for 'sous' (below)

and 'veiller' to watch' (2003, 332). 'Sousveillance', itself a form of 'reflectionism', is a term invented by Mann (1998: 93–102) to describe the process of using technologies to confront organizations by documenting their actions or the consequences of their actions. In other words, it gives those who are observed the power to become the observer, and the power to resist the authority of the state. Mann also discusses the idea of 'personal sousveillance', which is the use of technology such as social media to document one's own day-to-day experience. An example of this might include Bahraini activists who photographed themselves at the Pearl Roundabout. However, such seemingly banal 'personal sousveillance' can be re-appropriated by the regime and its supporters and used as part of its own surveillance apparatus (Bakir, 2010; Mann, 2002; Mann et al., 2003). This is nowhere more evident than in Bahrain, where the increasing polarization of society has resulted in citizens using social media as a tool of peer-to-peer to surveillance.

Methods

In order to assess how hegemonic forces are attempting to use social media as a tool of surveillance and social control, a virtual ethnography was carried out. A virtual ethnography is similar to a traditional ethnography and can:

involve the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (Hine, 2008: 259)

Doing this on 'social media' is not an easy task and, for months, involved the daily monitoring of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (the subjects of the study). Integral to this virtual ethnography was Twitter, which served as both a locus of interactions and conduit of vital information that led to relevant news, videos and images. Conducting this virtual ethnography moved beyond just 'lurking', and very much involved becoming part of Bahrain's online community. In some ways this was for the sake of establishing trust and credibility, but it was also an inevitable part of online activism, of which I have become a part.

The importance of building trust within what can only loosely be termed a Twitter 'community' cannot be overstated, for it formed the basis of establishing relationships that led to interviews, discussions and chats. It was also these relationships that developed through the virtual ethnography that formed the basis of investigative collaborations that were important in identifying potential surveillance tactics used by hegemonic forces. This is particularly true of the information regarding the company

Olton and Liliane Khalil, both of which will be discussed later. Through a combination of observation, participation and interviews spanning an 11-month period (February 2011–December 2011), it was possible to gain a deeper insight into the potential role of social media as tools of surveillance and social control. The most notable factors highlighted have been categorized as trolling, naming and shaming, passive observation, intelligence gathering and offline factors.

The ethical considerations for this research are, of course, voluminous: not only in the sense that people in Bahrain are fearful of the potential ramifications of speaking out about politically sensitive issues, but also because this research is fundamentally about surveillance and privacy. Indeed, Marc Smith (1999: 211) makes a point about new technologies that is still pertinent today, and asks if the analysis of such data is simply the extension of the means of surveillance that is already a disturbing trend in the information age. In his succinct paraphrasing of Mark Poster, Smith (1999: 211) suggests that observing such interactions can 'uncover social spaces, subjecting them to a kind of Panoptic surveillance'.

While it impossible to allay all of these concerns, measures have been taken to preserve the privacy of those involved. All information received in confidence has been anonymized and only included with the express consent of those who provided it. Furthermore, information disclosed in private has only been accepted from those whose identity I have verified. This stems from what is perceived to be a huge proliferation in anonymous accounts, the implications of which will be discussed in the findings of this study.

Findings

Trolling or Flaming

Broadly speaking, trolling can be defined as a form of aggressive internet communication where people using anonymous accounts engage in abusive behaviour towards other users. It is a form of what MacKinnon (2012) calls 'cyber-harassment', and can vary in severity, ranging from provocative comments to outright bullying. Contrary to Yochai Benkler's (2006: 374) suggestion that 'flame wars'² might dissipate as people become more familiar with new technologies, they have shown little sign of abating in Bahrain.

Trolling in Bahrain ranges from spiteful personal comments to death threats. For example, one Twitter user feared for the safety of her child when an anonymous troll started tweeting about how he (the troll) knew where the child went to school. He even named the school and gave details of its layout and location. Another activist reported how trolls created five parody accounts, all of which were dedicated to ridiculing her. In an attempt to rectify this, the victim had to send to Twitter on each occasion proof of identity to get rid of the anonymous accounts. Tiring of this, Twitter eventually suggested

she just tweet under a separate or anonymous identity, essentially admitting defeat at the hands of the troll(s).

Bahrain's Twitter trolls have acquired such a reputation that they have prompted many international journalists or activists reporting on Bahrain to write/blog about them, including Jillian York, (2011) David Goodman (2011) and Brian Dooley (2011). Following the release of the BICI report on 23 November 2011, Al-Jazeera reporter Gregg Carlstrom tweeted: 'Bahrain has by far the hardest-working Twitter trolls of any country I've reported on'.³ Global Voices editor for the Middle East and North Africa Amira Al Hussaini tweeted:⁴ 'Yawn: cyberbullying = censorship! Welcome to the new era of freedom in #Bahrain'. A number of people told me how trolling stopped them from tweeting politics, with one user stating:

Don't know how long Marc, my heart is heavy. Even my moderate views get attacked by trolls.

Few people who engage in trolling have accounts that reveal their true identity, and it is precisely this anonymity that makes many people suspicious. There are perhaps thousands of anonymous accounts, all of which have very few followers, and usually have an avatar that symbolizes their support for the regime (such as a picture of one of the Royal Family). Despite the fact that the regime enjoys some degree of legitimacy in Bahrain, there is a belief that many of these accounts are created by the security forces or PR companies to bully activists and give the illusion of widespread support for the government (Halvorssen, 2011).

Given that the US military is developing software that will allow it to 'secretly manipulate social media sites by using fake online personas to influence internet conversations and spread pro-American propaganda' (Fielding and Cobain, 2011), it comes as no surprise that the private sector might seek to profit from it. Indeed, it was revealed that BGR Gabara, a British PR firm reportedly working for the Bahraini government, planned to organize a 'Twitter campaign' on behalf of Kazakh children (Newman and Wright, 2011). This exacerbated fears that they were conducting similar operations in Bahrain.

What these findings illustrate is that trolling can result in people changing their tweeting habits. A number of people interviewed said how they were less likely to tweet anything against the regime after being trolled. Others changed their Twitter privacy settings so that their tweets would not be seen by the global public. This demonstrates how hegemonic forces can use social media to influence the flow of anti-government rhetoric, thus contributing to the state's censorship apparatus. Dissuading people from tweeting also creates an informational vacuum, one that can then be filled with pro-regime propaganda/PR.

Name and Shame

Perhaps one of the most pernicious things to come out of the uprising is the Hareghum Twitter account. Hareghum, which literally means 'the one that burns them', is a self-proclaimed defender of Bahrain, and spends his days disclosing information about traitors in Bahrain. This includes posting photos of people seen at anti-government rallies, circling their faces, disclosing their addresses, their places of work and their phone numbers. Unfortunately, the account has achieved such notoriety that it has become well known in Bahrain. An example of his impact was revealed to me by one informant, who said:

My friend she left the country after her husband who works in a bank became a target of this 7araghum [sic]. I don't think she'll ever come back.

While many have tried to unveil Hareghum's identity, no one has been successful. It is believed to be a number of people taking it in turns to manage the account. Hareghum has become an institution in itself in Bahrain, with people using it both to 'report' suspected 'traitors', and also to find information about 'traitors'. One such example was provided by someone whose father used to have a high position in a Bahraini company. He was contacted by someone who had information about a potential 'traitor' working in the company.

this guy sends a message to my Dad pasted from Hareghum about an [insert company name] employee.... He was sending it to my dad because my dad is still well connected, so can make things happen.... So he was telling my dad 'Do the needful' (i.e. get him fired).

The climate of fear that existed when this message was sent should not be underestimated, for it was a time when thousands of Bahrainis were being fired from work for taking in part in strikes, even though the strikes were 'within the permissible bounds of the law' (BICI, 2011: 420).

Prior to Hareghum, there were other examples of people with anonymous Twitter accounts receiving messages disclosing their name and identity. (e.g. imagine you had gone to great lengths to protect your identity on Twitter and then someone you don't know contacts you and tells you your name, phone number and address). On describing Hareghum, the Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (2011) stated:

In some cases, a photograph of a protester was posted with a comment asking for the name of the person, and other Twitter users then posted the requested information. Witnesses reported to the Commission that persons who had been named or identified by Harghum [sic] would then avoid sleeping at their home address for fear of an attack. Harghum [sic] also allegedly advertised a Mol [Ministry of the Interior] 'hotline', which people could call in order to report on persons engaged in anti-government activity. (BICI, 2011, 381)

The Harghum [sic] Twitter account targeted anti-government protesters and even disclosed their whereabouts and personal details. Harghum [sic] openly harassed, threatened and defamed certain individuals, and in some cases placed them in immediate danger. The Commission considers such harassment to be a violation of a person's right to privacy while also amounting to hate speech and incitement to violence. (BICI, 2011: 391)

As of November 2012, the government have done nothing about the account, even though the Commission stated that Hareghum 'produced material that international law requires to be prohibited and which is in fact prohibited under Bahrain law'. It is interesting to note that similar 'name and shame' groups existed on Facebook (al-Qassemi, 2011; Facebook 'used to hunt down Bahrain dissidents', 2011; Reuters, 2011), yet it is easier to have Facebook remove these groups. Twitter, on the other hand, makes it hard to remove such groups unless they are reported for spam. What this has led to is many pro-government supporters leading campaigns where they get people to report human rights activists such as Nabeel Rajab and Maryam al-Khawaja for spam. Despite Facebook's more sympathetic policy in getting rid of such groups, it was reportedly used to identify the workplace and home of 20-year-old poet Ayat al-Qurmezi, who angered authorities by reading out a poem that criticized King Hamad. Visitors to this Facebook page were told to write the 'traitor's name and work place'. Soon afterwards masked men arrested her (Al-Jazeera English, 2011; Facebook 'used to hunt down Bahrain dissidents', 2011).

Offline Factors

'Offline factors' refers to a number of pressures that do not necessarily occur online, but still work to encourage self-censorship by discouraging people from using social media. In March a photo of 'web terrorists'⁵ was circulated on Twitter. This included Manaf al-Muhandis, Mahmood Yousif and Mohammed Maskati – all prominent Twitter users or bloggers who were subsequently arrested (Reporters without Borders, 2011). They were all detained for varying lengths of time, and none of them tweeted anything

controversial or very political for a considerable time following their release. Prominent blogger Ali Abdulemam, who is currently believed to be in hiding, was sentenced *in absentia* to 15 years in prison for 'spreading false information and trying to subvert the regime'. In addition to this, blogger Zakariya Rashid Hassan Al Asheri was tortured to death in prison on 9 April 2011 (BICI, 2011: 238). As a result of the above arrests, important representatives of the activist community disappeared, further diminishing the visibility of credible online activism, and also prompting much fear among other online activists, who were far more reluctant to tweet anything critical of the regime. The death of Zakariya also resulted in Reporters without Borders putting Bahrain on a list of 'enemies of the internet' (BBC, 2012). Other offline factors include family pressure not to use social media (particularly Twitter), and widespread fear that the government is able to hack accounts and access personal information. One informant stated:

I used to tweet but then when some of my friends got arrested my father sat me down and gave me a looong [sic] talk, guilting me into deleting all my tweets.

The fact that the Tunisians used phishing techniques to obtain the Facebook account details of political activists strengthened this anxiety (Ryan, 2011).

Intelligence Gathering

Other, perhaps more sinister elements faced by activists are the clandestine operations undertaken by companies such as Olton, a UK-based intelligence-gathering/PR firm that has a contract with the Bahrain Economic Development Board. One activist told me:

There's this British company called Olton. I don't know exactly what they do except that they employ Bahrainis loyal to the regime to do something with social media. The person recruiting them is ex-UK military.

Despite the government of Bahrain's Tender Board's description of Olton's work being 'to develop an electronic system to track international media', one of their employees is known to have worked for the Ministry of the Interior, the body responsible for Bahrain's security forces (Desmukh, 2011a). Furthermore, Olton was at the IDEX Arms Fair in Abu Dhabi where the company was reported to be marketing its 'web-trawling' software as something that could head off unrest in the Middle East. It would do this through monitoring social media in order to identify ringleaders (Desmukh, 2011a).

Fears that Twitter and Facebook were being monitored were further exacerbated after at least 47 students were dismissed from Bahrain Polytechnic for 'participating in unlicensed gatherings and marches'. This was 'based on evidence mostly obtained

from social media pages like Facebook' (Yasin, 2011) Some were dismissed for simply 'liking' an anti-government post on Facebook (Yasin, 2011). Many reported that they were dismissed after authorities showed them printouts of their Facebook pages.

Blurring this line between propaganda, PR, 'data-mining' and intelligence gathering was 'Liliane Khalil', a hoax journalist who used blogs, Twitter and email to build up a convincing online persona. Although she had claimed to be the US editor of a pro-government blog called the Bahrain Independent, an investigation revealed that she was a hoax (Jones, 2011). Although Liliane Khalil's exact identity remains unknown, there is evidence that links her to Task Consultancy, a Bahraini company that was paid by the Bahraini government to formulate a PR plan (Desmukh, 2011b). Liliane Khalil also interviewed a number of activists on the understanding that she wanted to hear 'their side of the story'. However, several of those interviewed reported that she passed on their personal information to a pro-regime Twitter user – who then broadcast it on Twitter stating that the interviewees were traitors.

'Passive' Observation

In anticipation of the protests, the Bahraini government created a number of Twitter accounts, most notably one for the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) – the body responsible for Bahrain's security forces. While the MoI's account tended to publish news without interacting with other people, this did not stop people from interacting with the MoI. Between the months of February and April, it was common for pro-regime supporters to use Twitter to 'report' people they thought were traitors to the MoI. The following tweet is an example of this:

@hussainm89 Dear @moi_bahrain can you please arrest this MOFO
Hussain Mirza born 1989, he is a traitor

Although it is doubtful that the ministry takes such complaints seriously, the impact that the potential threat of surveillance has is very real, as someone once made clear.

Be careful Marc. Don't argue a lot. A lot of people from Moi on Twitter.
And if you mention the king justice etc, you might be unable to enter the
country. Just be careful plz.

Discussion

For activists, using social media as a tool for activism or representation is fraught with danger. The tactics adopted by hegemonic forces in Bahrain contributed to a climate of fear and distrust, one that disrupted social media space by assimilating it as part of the regime's surveillance apparatus. Trolling, for example, is not only a form of social control that exercises its power through intimidation, but also serves as a reminder that one's

behaviour is always being watched, and that any potential dissent will never be without fear of observation. Even the mere presence of an MoI Twitter account was enough to regulate some people's behaviour by reminding them that they were being monitored. The incarceration of key online activists also reminded Bahrainis of the potential costs of utilizing social media for dissent, and thus asserted that the transgression of a certain set of normative behaviours (in this case acquiescence) would not be tolerated.

The impact in Bahrain of trolling and naming and shaming illustrates the dangers of these forms of 'cyber-vigilantism', which will only become more detrimental as social cohesion in Bahrain is further eroded. Hareghum is a particular worry, for it has become a quasi-official institution, one whose continued existence and endorsement by some supporters of the regime represents tacit support of its utility as a method of social control. Just as plain-clothes thugs operate alongside the police in suppressing protests, accounts like Hareghum's worked alongside the regime's intelligence-gathering apparatus, appropriating citizens' 'personal sousveillance' and using it to persecute, vilify and threaten. Although Hareghum's identity still remains unknown, the opaque way in which the regime has so far conducted the crackdown, and the blurring of lines between law enforcement and state-endorsed vigilantism have heightened the suspicions of activists, many of whom believe that Hareghum actually operates with MoI approval. Whether or not this is the case is in many ways, irrelevant. This is because perception plays a fundamental role in surveillance – for what we perceive and what is actual form the underlying mechanism of the Panopticon, which seeks not only to watch, but to make people *believe* they are being watched.

Another alarming trend is the clandestine role played by predominantly western PR and security firms, many of which are 'exploiting the burgeoning but unregulated surveillance market' (Doward and Lewis, 2012). Bahrain also enlists the services of companies like Nokia Siemens, whose SMS monitoring technology was used by the state's security apparatus to intercept the communications of suspected dissidents (Silver and Elgin, 2011). Olton, the British company offering expertise in social media, also offers a 'reputation management' service. This aims to promote 'positive' online commentary while 'mitigating the negative' (Olton, 2012). The fact it is also an 'intelligence-gathering' company has serious implications for freedom of speech. As I have stated elsewhere:

The threat posed by unscrupulous PR companies to freedom of speech should not be underestimated. It is bad enough that they distort the public sphere in exchange for money, yet it is the rise of companies like Olton that is the most alarming, for when does intelligence gathering become evidence gathering? Furthermore, when does 'reputation management' involve facilitating the silencing of those narratives that oppose the desired rhetoric of the paying client? (2012)

The recent revelation that that British PR firm Bell Pottinger was offering to help

companies hijack citizen petitions in order to influence European Union law raises questions about a similar incident that occurred in Bahrain last year (Rawlinson, 2012). This involved the circulation of a petition on Twitter that claimed to be a proposal listing the demands of Bahrain's youth for an upcoming reconciliation initiative called the National Dialogue. Over a thousand people signed it, though many of the signatories were anonymous, sock-puppet accounts. The following day the National Unity Gathering (Bahrain's new pro-government political party) used the petition as a basis for determining what Bahraini youth wanted (unsurprisingly, they did not want political change – just security) (*Gulf Daily News*, 2011). The notion that anonymous online accounts might be rubber-stamping policies in order to give them a veneer of democratic legitimacy illustrates the ease with which social media can be used to manufacture consent. Although this might seem like the stuff of Orwellian fantasy, one must not underestimate the dangers of a growing surveillance industry, one that capitalizes on the desire of authoritarian regimes around the world to monitor, control and suppress dissent.

Conclusion

Through trolling, naming and shaming, 'passive' observation, intelligence gathering and offline factors, the hegemonic order is able to utilize social media in a manner that serves its own interests. Specifically, it helps the government and its supporters to preserve the status quo through extending the means by which they conduct surveillance. Such methods are attempts to impose normative forms of behaviour in spaces that allow for the performance of identities that challenge the hegemonic order. These spaces, which include Shia religious structures, the Pearl Roundabout and social media, all represent what Foucault (1986) described as heterotopias, that is, places that challenge 'safe space' and allow for the flourishing of resistance identities that challenge the hegemonic order. This capacity of social media to function as a space of resistance did not go uncontested in Bahrain, and hegemonic forces also used it to enhance and 'mobilise identities to facilitate the extraction of resources from the society to confront the external (and in Bahrain's case, internal) threat' (Saideman, 2002: 170). So while social media allows activists to 'overcome the powerlessness of their solitary despair ... and fight the powers that be by identifying the networks that are', it also allows hegemonic forces to resist change (Castells, 2009: 431). Furthermore, Bahrain illustrates how it is not simply faceless authoritarian regimes that resist political change, but citizens too, especially those who benefit both economically and socially from maintaining the status quo. Indeed, just as those advocating political change can use social media to create networks of resistance, those representing the hegemonic order can mobilize their own networks of domination.

Perhaps one of the saddest aspects of all this was how information shared amid a climate of optimism, such as photos of peaceful protesters at the Pearl Roundabout, was

re-appropriated by the likes of Hareghum and re-framed within a context of treachery, terrorism and betrayal. Such abuses of social media not only remind Bahrainis of the potential costs of sharing information publicly but also demonstrate how trust is an increasingly scarce commodity. The nature of this breakdown of trust was nowhere more evident than on Facebook, and numerous interviewees shared stories of how they purged their 'friend lists' through both anger at their newly developed political outlook, and through fear that that person might gain access to potentially 'incriminating' photos or information. The erosion of trust is itself a crucial part of the effects of surveillance, for the inability to trust others promotes increased isolation of the individual, which can work against social cohesion and discourage the formation of strong networks that may potentially pose a threat to the incumbent order.

Although it must be emphasized that these negative effects are very real, they by no means undermine the importance of social media as a tool for sousveillance. It is an instrument of both *empowerment* and control, yet the extent to which it functions as either depends very much on the cultural, geopolitical, technological and temporal context in which it is being used. The role of social media is ambivalent, and although it has been an incredibly positive force in Bahrain, documenting its successes would necessitate a separate article.

As it stands, pro-democracy activists still face a great many obstacles when it comes to finding spaces from which to represent themselves. The brutal daily crackdowns in the villages, the destruction of the Pearl Roundabout, the demolition of mosques all represent attempts to control space and render it ahistorical, conformist and safe. For the regime, these are all spaces of crisis, transformation and change, or heterotopias. Social media are no different, and can also be regulated and controlled. As the struggle for democracy continues in urban space, so does it in cyberspace. In many ways, the battle is *for* cyberspace, for it is a battle between the principles of empowerment and control, the continuation of which underlines the argument that social media are a tool of both emancipation and repression.

1. In this case hegemonic is as defined broadly as the dominant political and social order, which in the case of Bahrain is the Al-Khalifa family and their predominantly Sunni support base.
2. 'Flame wars' is a term used to describe incendiary arguments between users on online discussion forums.

3. See: <https://oauth.twitter.com/#!/glcarlstrom/status/139315984212303873> (accessed 11 November 2011).
4. See: <https://twitter.com/#!/JustAmira/status/133469983308124160> (accessed 7 November 2011).
5. See: <http://www.wata.cc/up/2011/3/images/w-cf9fa6ca9a.jpg> (accessed 31 March 2011).

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IS IT POSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION THROUGH THE PRISM OF SOCIAL MEDIA?

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Juliette Harkin, M.Phil Oxon, is a researcher and consultant on the Arab media and a PhD student undertaking research on Syria in the School of Political, Social and International Studies at the University of East Anglia. Her M.Phil thesis (2009) focused on the changing practice of journalism in Syria.

The aim of this article is to explore a renewed and radical 'media culture' that has developed in the extraordinary conditions of the Syrian revolution. The article quickly dismisses the focus on the technology and platforms while using small-scale ethnography to examine social networking sites like Facebook and to underscore the diversity of content being produced by Syrians. It notes how the Syrian media revolution is clearly well under way and how radical, alternative forms of media production are flourishing.

KEYWORDS

media, radical alternative media, revolt, semi-published, social media, social networking sites, Syria

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