

## Comment:

**Social Media As an Opportunity to Bahraini Women**

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## Abstract

*Since the uprising in February 2011 the Bahraini female activists but also ordinary Bahraini women have emerged as new leaders in the society, and this due to the increasing role of social media. Their ideas, voices and activities have been receiving stronger support from within their – often conservative – communities. It is now more accepted by the public that the democratic transition cannot be achieved without the participation of women.*

## Keywords

*cyberactivism, democracy, journalism, activism, Muslim women, Arab Spring, social media, Bahrain, media studies*

There is no doubt that social and new media helped young women to play a central role in the uprising in Bahrain, similar to the rest of the so called “Arab Spring” countries. Cyber activism became the main drive to put many young Arab female activists on the map, providing them with lots of online followers, media exposure and in some cases international fame. I still remember how my Twitter account was tripled with followers in just a few days after the uprising started in Bahrain in February 2011. As a journalist, people from inside as well as outside Bahrain felt the need to follow me and many other journalists in order to get a sense of the news from the ground. That was the beginning of the shift in the way Bahraini journalists, as well as activists were seen and perceived in the eyes of their own community.

Since 2011, the portrayal of women in Bahrain has dramatically shifted; women are now being portrayed as proactive leaders, vocal, and brave. A portrayal which is somehow new to the small island. When Jalila Alsaman, a Bahraini teacher and mother, was released after spending months in prison

for her activism, people treated her like a hero. Thousands of Bahrainis gathered in front of prison to receive and cheer her and her family. Huge banners showing her picture were hung on the houses of her conservative village for months to resemble the pride of her role in the prodemocracy movement. Many people in those Bahraini villages were hesitant to vote for women in the election, now treating one of their own as a hero and a leader.

In 2007, I completed a comparative study, the first of its kind in Bahrain, researching the portrayal of women politicians in the Bahraini media. This research focused on print media, since it was the most popular media at that time, before the media landscape shifted to give more space to new media. The main finding of this research was: women politicians were covered by print media in Bahrain positively, but they were not given as much space and attention in the coverage as the space given to the men politicians. Women politicians were always treated as “fillers” to the news coverage, they rarely made it to the headlines or front pages, and they were almost never portrayed as political leaders. However, the good news was that the negative content towards women political participation in the Bahraini print media was very small.

Those findings sound very strange today considering the shift not just in the media landscape in Bahrain and the region, but also the shift in the political situation and the rise of new, young and fresh political actors, as a direct result of the Arab Spring. And in order to understand this shift, we need to go back to analyze both the media landscape and the political situation in Bahrain prior to the 2011 popular uprising.

Up until the end of the year 2010, the only TV and radio stations in Bahrain were state owned and controlled, which is why the general public were depending on print media as the main source of news and information. Even though newspapers in Bahrain were privately owned, but the majority of these newspapers were owned or controlled by members in the ruling family, leaving very little space to independent media content. After the Bahraini uprising in February 2011, the government practiced more control

over the media as part of its crackdown on the uprising, which was the main reason for the major shift in the media landscape. Social media has blossomed in Bahrain over the last few years, among a youthful and well educated population, especially women. During the recent uprising, thousands of Bahrainis used Facebook and Twitter to organize protests, share information otherwise hidden by state media, as well as playing the role of the watch dog to human rights violations committed inside a country facing a media blackout.

And it is hard to mention Bahraini online female activists, without mentioning Zainab Alkhawaja, or “Angry Arabiya” as her profile name in Twitter shows. Zainab is a twenty something Bahraini activist who became widely known since early 2011 for her online activism. Zainab has almost 48 thousand followers to her Twitter account, and even though she is in prison now, she was recognized as one of the most influential people in the Arab world online.

Politically, the main idea behind the uprising in Bahrain in 2011 was to put an end to the authoritarian role and force the ruling family to share the power with their people. This was never an easy fight, especially considering the fact that it’s happening in one of the only remaining absolute monarchies in the world. Though this was not the first time for such an uprising to take place in Bahrain, social media and new technologies made it possible for the movement to grow stronger. Many groups managed to play a vital role in this movement, including women who were politically and technologically savvy. It is worth to mention that 42 percent of the population in Bahrain is women, and that the female labor participation rate in Bahrain is 39 percent, which is a relatively large percentage in the Arab world.

The impact of women’s work to feed the uprising in Bahrain was very alarming to the authorities in Bahrain, which is why they were equally punished. Bahrain is still the only country in the Gulf region which has cases of jailing and torturing women for their political engagement, as well as several cases of women killed on the ground by police forces.

The crackdown on women activists in Bahrain created a lot of admiration from the general public, people in very conservative villages started chanting

for those women, they started viewing them differently, following them on Twitter and listening to them speak in the media, or on the stage when they organize for a public protest. Suddenly the image of the Bahraini women as a political leader became so popular and acceptable, as Bahraini women were equally active online and on the ground.

If there was something that the Arab Spring achieved in Bahrain so far, it is giving women a political outlet to prove themselves as real players to the general public to see. This outlet was not available before to normal women and was only available to those who were privileged by the state. However, the uprising witnessed the rise of ordinary Bahraini women, who were given a golden opportunity to emerge to the public. They proved themselves to their community, and still are proving that no transition could be achieved without the participation of women.

### Acknowledgements

Nada Alwadi is a Bahraini journalist, writer and researcher. She has been working in print media since 2003 covering politics and human rights issues in Bahrain and the Middle East. She holds a Master's degree in Mass Communication with an emphasis on women's political empowerment in the media. She was a Humphrey/Fulbright fellow at the school of journalism in the University of Maryland. Alwadi covered the recent crackdown in Bahrain for several international media outlets including USA Today. In 2011, she was one of the recipients for the first James Lawson Award for Nonviolent Achievement by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. Alwadi co-founded the Bahraini Press Association with other prominent Bahraini journalists last year. This association focuses on defending local and international journalists who have been attacked or targeted by the Bahraini authorities.