


ROUNDTABLE

Digital De-Citizenship: The Rise of the Digital Denizen in Bahrain

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Revolutions seldom involve more than one percent of the population. However, in Bahrain, a small island nation with a population of around 570,000, twenty percent of the population took to the streets in February 2011 to demand greater democratic reform, making it “proportionally one of the greatest shows of ‘people power’ in modern history.”¹ The regime’s response was disproportionately brutal. Saudi-dominated troops from the Gulf Cooperation Council Peninsula Shield Force were “invited to” or “invaded” Bahrain, depending on who is telling the story. Under cover of the Saudi military, Bahrain’s security forces killed dozens of civilians, torturing, maiming, and raping many others.² The arsenal of repressive techniques was exhaustive. Belonging also was used as a tool of repression, with many being stripped of their Bahraini citizenship on spurious, terror-related charges.

Despite brutal episodes of unrest in Bahrain’s history, no one expected this. The early days of the Arab uprisings were infused with hope, partly spurred on by a sense of technological utopianism. The paradigm of “liberation technology” was ascendant, with social and Web 2.0 technologies promising new means of interrogating power and making rights claims both on- and offline.³ The mobile phone, Twitter, and Facebook were all meant to expose state brutality, facilitate opposition organization, and connect disparate members of society. Crucially, new technologies would be the key in the fight against decades of al-Khalifa authoritarianism and were supposed to modulate state repression. This intervention discusses the interrelationship, parallels, and possibilities of technology and citizenship after 2011. There is a tendency to fetishize new technology. Instead, we should recognize that, although technology has moments that validate this optimism, we cannot generalize such aphorisms. The reality is that, even with an increasingly globally-connected world, social constructivism and technological determinism make unpredictable bedfellows. Political economy, political structures, power and the affordances of these tools matter in the realization of digital citizenship. It is wrong to suggest parity between all those connected by the Internet.

A Brief Radical Reimagining of Citizenship

Facebook and Twitter provided new avenues for Bahrainis to perform their citizenship online. Studies of citizenship have evolved from viewing citizenship as a form of legal belonging with its incumbent rights and duties to a performative act that takes new forms across a variety of sites within and beyond the state-centered arena of politics.⁴ Citizenship as performance draws attention to the deed rather than the doer and is brought into being through behaviors and activities undertaken online.⁵ It also can be understood

¹Sean L. Yom and F. Gregory Gause III, “Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On,” *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 74–88.

²M. C. Bassiouni, N. Rodley, B. al-Awadhi, P. Kirsch, and M. H. Arsanjani, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, Manama, Bahrain, 23 November 2011, 353, www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf; “Bahrain: Breaking the Silence,” BBC News, 24 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMuhSszAUJg&feature=emb_title.

³Larry Diamond, “Liberation Technology,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010): 69–83.

⁴Maria Rovisco and Peter Lunt, “Introduction: Performance and Citizenship,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5 (2019): 615–29, doi:10.1177/1367877919849965.

⁵Liesbet van Zoonen, Farida Vis, and Sabina Mihelj, “Performing Citizenship on YouTube: Activism, Satire and Online Debate around the Anti-Islam Video *Fitna*,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4 (2010): 249–62.

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as “a civic practice through which people connect to others and act as citizens in mediated public spheres.”⁶ The World Wide Web is a mediated public sphere par excellence, particularly when it comes to social media. Here, citizens can utilize digital technologies to articulate and imagine their role within a given community.⁷ Social networking sites are an arena in which people can create new transnational networks that allow for the creation of de-spatialized communities.

It was expected that the Al Khalifa regime would be hard hit by the ability of citizens to circumvent traditional state-controlled media in order to engage in performative rights claims online. This was particularly true for the *Baharna*, the indigenous population that has lived for centuries in modern-day Bahrain as well as the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the infrastructure of Bahrain, like many other wealthy Gulf states, was ideal for the realization of digital citizenship. High Internet penetration, high mobile phone usage, and relatively affordable Internet subscription rates have resulted in the widespread adoption of new technologies. Indeed, the economic boon of oil and its incumbent modernity has created an infrastructure conducive to digital citizenship. However, this highly connected nation coupled with decades of festering political opposition to the regime also provided a febrile atmosphere for the articulation of new rights claims in cyberspace.

There was some cause for hope in early 2011. In February and March people used Facebook and Twitter to articulate new political visions for their country. Creative resistance, hashtag activism, satirical YouTube series such as *Baharna Drama*, and parody accounts all indicated a surge in new citizenship performativity and genres previously absent from the state-controlled media (Fig. 1).⁸ Social media allowed for networked organizing among aspiring as well as seasoned activists. Social media also became a place for Bahrainis to make rights claims to both local and international audiences, bridging the gap between the domestic and global public spheres. Bahrainis living in exile in London and Copenhagen connected with those in Bahrain. Journalists and NGOs were able to monitor, connect, and report based on real-time reliable information coming from social media. Indeed, the Internet facilitated the creation of communities of active citizens engaged in espousing a new democratic vision for Bahrain based on human and political rights.

Much of what was articulated both on- and offline early in the uprising represented the expression of a radical form of citizenship and reimagining of the Bahraini nation as a democratic constitutional monarchy devoid of sectarian and familial rule. When the regime sought to fragment the opposition through the implementation of a sectarian divide-and-rule policy, Bahrainis pushed back and mobilized online to assert unity between Sunni and Shi‘a, as well as between the different factions of the opposition. A young Bahraini engineer called Manaf al-Muhandis created the #UniteBH (Unite Bahrain) movement. The idea was simple: people would share a tweet summarizing what it was that brought Bahrainis together. Slogans like “No Sunni, no Shi‘a” became metonymic of the campaign itself as well as the utopian vision of many of Bahrain’s youthful opposition. The fact that the campaign was spawned online indicated the binding role of digital technology as the zeitgeist of the time. Here, citizenship in Bahrain was articulated as a vision of harmonious coexistence under the banner of tolerance and plurality, rather than the segmented assemblage of compartmentalized interest groups favored by the Al Khalifa regime. The campaign spawned paraphernalia such as videos, badges, t-shirts, and music.⁹ It also resulted in a human chain linking Bahrainis across the country, who held hands in a symbol of unity (Fig. 2). This chain went from the Pearl Roundabout, the symbolic home of the uprising, to the al-Fateh mosque, the counterrevolutionary hub and symbolic site that represented the Al Khalifa’s conquest of Bahrain in the 1700s.¹⁰

However, this period of a radical reimagining of citizenship did not last. The #UniteBH campaign, facilitated by social media, ran counter to the Al Khalifa regime’s long-held stratification of the Bahraini community into disparate, and therefore easily controllable, communities. Indeed, citizenship

⁶Ibid.

⁷Arne Hintz, Lina Dencik, and Karin Wahl Jorgensen, “Digital Citizenship and Surveillance Society,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 731–39.

⁸*Baharna Drama* was a satirical series made by anonymous *Baharna*. The series satirized government attempts to spread disinformation and smear the opposition movement through mock reenactments of high-profile state propaganda.

⁹“1st UniteBH Video,” YouTube video, 4 March 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V28KpoJkDno>.

¹⁰Marc Owen Jones, “Satire, Social Media and Revolutionary Cultural Production in the Bahrain Uprising: From Utopian Fiction to Political Satire,” *Communication and the Public* 2, no. 2 (2017): 136–53, doi: 10.1177/2057047317706372.



Figure 1. A screen grab from the YouTube-based satirical series *Baharna Drama* that emerged in the post-2011 milieu of revolutionary cultural production. Accessed 20 September 2020.

in Bahrain has traditionally been a hierarchical system of privilege, attributed according to loyalty to the regime. Al-Muhandis was arrested briefly, and stories began to circulate that those carrying #UniteBH paraphernalia were being assaulted by the security services. The ruling family wanted to assert its monopoly as chief interlocutor and mediator between Bahrain's different communities. After all, the regime's biggest fear was that Bahrainis would come together to oppose them, a fear compounded by new digital technologies. Eventually, the #UniteBH campaign was co-opted by the regime, and the new discourse was that Bahrain was uniting against an Iran-backed theocratic takeover. This, of course, was a far cry from the grassroots intention of the movement, which articulated new forms of citizenship that implicitly challenged the Al Khalifa's ruling strategies.

Notwithstanding this, #UniteBH was one of many moments in early 2011 when the hope and optimism engendered by the possibility of political change led to the articulation of a new form of citizenship online. These transient moments of citizenship get to the essence of the definition. If one considers citizenship to be an ambiguous process "vulnerable to changes in government and policy," then one must understand the temporality of types of citizenship produced at any given moment.¹¹ Rather than ask if technology has a negative or positive impact on citizenship, it is better to ask how technology at a given moment facilitates and generates new forms of citizenship, however transient.

#UniteBH was the canary in the coal mine, not only for digital citizenship but also for more normative legal citizenship. Offline, Bahrain has revoked the legal citizenship of at least 990 nationals since 2019.¹² The stripping of citizenship has almost exclusively targeted Shi'a members of society on often spurious "terror-related" charges. Such a tactic is not new in Bahrain; hundreds of people have had their citizenship revoked since the introduction of the first citizenship law in the 1930s. In the 1980s, security forces even illegally and forcibly deported hundreds of Bahraini passport holders simply because they were Shi'a.¹³ The King of Bahrain has the power to grant and revoke citizenship, making him the ultimate arbiter in who can be deemed Bahraini and who cannot. Often citizenship is considered a reward for loyalty, which is why thousands of foreign Sunnis who serve in the security forces are given citizenship in a controversial process known as *tajnis* (naturalization). The removal of citizenship effectively renders former "citizens" stateless. The ramifications are enormous. Those who actually lose their legal citizenship face the loss of important life opportunities. Securing income via jobs, bank loans, and labor is facilitated by legal citizenship, as are movement, travel, and other rights enjoyed by citizens. Loss of citizenship denies even the right of people to leave the country, and, for instance, claim asylum from a place where they may theoretically engage in criticism of the regime. The legal removal of citizenship confines its victims to the territorial jurisdiction of the Bahraini state, allowing the regime to control the discursive possibilities of criticism through strategies that remove digital citizenship (digital de-citizenship).

¹¹May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.

¹²"Bahrain Strips Over 100 of Nationality on 'Terror' Charges," al-Jazeera, 16 April 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/bahrain-strips-100-nationality-terror-charges-190416103932997.html>.

¹³Marc Owen Jones, *Political Repression in Bahrain* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 95.



Figure 2. Images of Bahrainis forming a human chain in March 2011. From Jafria News, 7 March 2011, <https://jafrianews.com/2011/03/07/baharins-majority-demonstrated-shia-sunni-brotherhood-to-denounce-the-kings-plan-to-divide-and-rule/bahraini-shia-sunni-human-chain>.

After almost a decade of political repression, the hope and optimism that characterized early 2011 have been replaced by an atmosphere of censorship and conformity. New censorship laws and political repression have limited the ability of citizens to utilize social media to express political opinions. The dystopian scale of this crackdown became acutely evident in 2019 when Bahrain's Ministry of Interior circulated messages saying that merely following dissidents on social media could expose them to legal liability.¹⁴

The spaces for online discussion and expression have been co-opted such that only specific demonstrations of citizenship are permitted by the Al Khalifa regime. Failure to adhere to this limited repertoire of performance has potentially grave consequences, such as torture, incarceration, and even the loss of legal citizenship. This raises the question: What is the nature of digital citizenship and citizenship in Bahrain?

The Demise of Liberation Technology and Antisocial Distancing

If the public sphere is the arena in which citizenship is constructed and articulated, then access to this space, or lack thereof, is integral to the landscape of citizenship. Although cyberspace created new opportunities for radical forms of citizenship, this was short-lived and quickly replaced by a profoundly repressive online environment. Indeed, if e-citizenship represents the merging of citizenship with technology, then "de-citizenship" is the removal of that digital citizenship. However, although the concept of citizenship has expanded to include new digital spaces and related questions about rights, performativity implies an environment in which performances are possible in the first place. Unlike proponents of liberation technology, techno-dystopians and so-called neo-Luddites have been proponents of a darker vision: the potential of technology to lead to opportunities for surveillance, coercion, and control. In an authoritarian state like Bahrain, the dystopian potential is perhaps more salient. An efficient infrastructure of data flows combined with the overreach of an autocratic regime offers multiple opportunities for "veillance," that is, moments in which digital acts of citizenship can be constrained, regulated, and

¹⁴Lisa Barrington, "Bahrain Says Following Opposition Social Media Could Result in Legal Action," Reuters, 3 June 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-bahrain-security-socialmedia/bahrain-says-following-opposition-social-media-could-result-in-legal-action-idUKKCN1T30WE>.

observed. Covid-19 has brought this into sharp relief. Phone applications that track the movement of citizens are becoming commonplace and have already raised the specter of a massive and irreparable invasion of privacy.

With all this talk of digital technology transcending boundaries and de-spatializing geographically rooted politics, states still matter, especially in a time of rising nationalism. Indeed, surveillance, censorship, and online coercion are particularly acute in Bahrain. Armies of Internet trolls—accounts designed to intimidate and provoke activists—have multiplied since 2011. Dozens of Bahraini netizens have reported being intimidated into silence.¹⁵ Other more insidious forms of surveillance also are at play. Activists have been smeared on newly created websites masquerading as legitimate news sites.¹⁶ Some of these smears were gendered, tapping into locally rooted taboos, with women activists accused of being promiscuous and men accused of being gay.¹⁷ Many received death threats. The purpose was to put them on the fringes of Bahraini society and make them seem deviant, alien, and outside Bahraini cultural norms.¹⁸ Fraudster journalists using social media accounts praising the regime appeared and duped activists into giving them personal information that was used against them. The strategic leaking of the digital images of dead bodies brutalized by the security forces angered some but intimidated many others into staying quiet, both on- and offline. Indeed, the grotesque brutality of this content was that which made it go viral.

Soon those who feared to speak out were only able to do so through anonymous accounts. The anonymous citizen is one who creates some distance between their corporeal body and their digital identity. Their citizenship is marginalized by their inability to express their political demands openly. Even so, anonymity did not bring safety. Even activists wishing to remain anonymous were rarely able to do so. Primitive internet protocol (IP) spying techniques were used by the government to reveal the identity of anonymous activists.¹⁹ Once found, these accounts were infiltrated by the security services to uncover other activists linked to that account. As the protection of anonymity waned, so too did the ability to retreat into more private forms of communication, such as WhatsApp.²⁰ Soon arrested activists were tortured to reveal their passcodes and new technologies employed to force people's phones into giving up their secrets. Citizens found themselves in front of the public prosecutor, who wielded transcripts of their private WhatsApp conversations.²¹ Those who had expressed dissent on their private Facebook page found themselves brought before their bosses for disciplinary proceedings. Students were expelled from college for merely liking a Facebook post deemed to be critical of the government.²² Passionate young journalists, who used the Internet and their video cameras to document and upload abuses perpetrated by security services, were frequently arrested. Some even paid with their lives, such as Ahmad Isma'il Hassan, a citizen journalist who was shot and killed in 2012 while covering protests against the Bahrain Grand Prix.²³ Others included Karim Fakhrawi, cofounder of the country's only independent newspaper, *al-Wasat*, and online writer Zakariyya Hassan.²⁴ Soon, government espionage and subterfuge

¹⁵Marc Owen Jones, "Social Media, Surveillance and Social Control in the Bahrain Uprising," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2013): 69–92, <http://doi.org/10.16997/wpc.167>.

¹⁶Nick Monaco and Carly Nyst, *State-Sponsored Trolling: How Governments Are Deploying Disinformation as Part of Broader Digital Harassment Campaigns* (Palo Alto, CA: Institute for the Future, 2018), https://www.iftf.org/fileadmin/user_upload/images/DigIntel/IFTF_State_sponsored_trolling_report.pdf.

¹⁷Erin Kilbride, "Too Gay to Represent Bahrain," cited by Brian Whitaker, "Homophobia and Nationalism: 'Too Gay to Represent Bahrain,'" *al-bab.com*, 16 December 2014, <https://al-bab.com/blog/2014/12/homophobia-and-nationalism-too-gay-represent-bahrain>.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹IP addresses are a numerical value assigned to a device when it connects to the Internet; Bahrain Watch, "The IP Spy Files: How Bahrain's Government Silences Anonymous Online Dissent," <https://web.archive.org/web/20190424144417/https://bahrainwatch.org/ipspy/viewreport.php>

²⁰Christopher Bing and Raphael Satter, "Exclusive: Government Officials around the Globe Targeted for Hacking through WhatsApp," Reuters, 31 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-cyber-whatsapp-nsgroup-excl/exclusive-government-officials-around-the-globe-targeted-for-hacking-through-whatsapp-sources-idUSKBN1XA27H>.

²¹Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, "Bahraini Government Strips WhatsApp Groups of Privacy," IFEX, 10 March 2016, <https://ifex.org/bahraini-government-strips-whatsapp-groups-of-privacy>.

²²Sara Yasin, "Bahrain: Where a Facebook 'Like' Gets You Expelled," Index on Censorship, 14 October 2011, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2011/10/bahrain-where-a-facebook-like-gets-you-expelled>.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Bassiouni et al., *Report*.

had eroded trust between citizens and activists alike, and many retreated into their atomized, individualized, and less powerful selves.

However, performances of citizenship in a divided society are not all dictated by the government, or indeed the opposition. In a country where the regime has polarized society along sectarian lines for decades, contested notions of citizenship have emerged. Online, numerous apparently genuine accounts expressed loyalty to the regime and took it upon themselves to envision citizenship in Bahrain as a defense of the status quo. Vigilante accounts doxxed activists, circulating private images, phone numbers, and personal details of citizens who had attended the Pearl Roundabout or engaged in perceived disloyal behavior.²⁵ Despite breaking the law as they harassed others online, none were prosecuted. Indeed, their loyal defense of the ruling family was deemed an acceptable demonstration of what it meant to be Bahraini.

Global Citizen Versus the Global Surveillance Industrial Complex

Beyond autocratic Bahrain, democratic states such as the UK and the US enable and abet the erosion of digital citizenship. The global surveillance industrial complex, less regulated than the arms trade, although no less insidious, has profited enormously from the Bahrain uprising. European companies like Gamma International sell products like FinSpy or FinFisher. These malicious programs infect your computer, allowing the security forces to listen to your microphone, access your webcam, record your screen, and track your keystrokes. Numerous Bahraini opposition members have been targeted, including, for example, Hassan Mashayma, an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience serving a life sentence in Bahrain.

Others, like the Israeli-based firm Cellebrite, sell technologies that breach locked cell phones.²⁶ Neither public nor private acts of dissent are off limits for the security forces. Indeed, “surveillance realism” is the new norm.²⁷ We live in an age of data colonialism.²⁸ Companies extract our data and monetize it to sell to advertisers, while governments ensure that our online behaviors do not have an impact on the balance of power. Any performances of citizenship should be done on the assumption of being monitored, whether by state or private actors. Firms such as Gamma International profit off the digital traces left by those engaging in digital citizenship. Data, and thus our digital citizenship, has become a commodity. Indeed, part of the surveillance industrial complex’s business model is sustained by crushing the political yearnings of millions of citizens living under authoritarian regimes. This problem has become particularly pertinent following COVID-19, as countries around the world, including Bahrain, have rolled out highly intrusive and mandatory contact tracing apps. These apps track users in real time using GPS, allowing the government to know exactly where everyone is, at any moment.²⁹ Authoritarian governments can push ahead with widespread surveillance strategies under the smokescreen of a global pandemic, when people are vulnerable to acquiescing to such measures on the legitimate basis of public health protection. Covid-19, has, like the war on terror, provided a pretext for authoritarian regimes to crush political opposition and human rights on the pretext of security.

Automated Civil Society and Antisocial Distancing

Whereas Covid-19 has provided an opportunity for “upgrading authoritarianism,” the next generation of technology, including artificial intelligence, promises more opportunities for the demise of digital

²⁵Jones, *Political Repression*, 276. To dox is to publicly post private information about a particular person (Jones, *Political Repression*).

²⁶Bahrain Watch, “Israeli Forensics Product Used to Convict Bahraini Activist Who Underwent Torture,” 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190531185739/https://bahrainwatch.org/amanatech/en/investigations/cellebrite>

²⁷Lina Dencik and Jonathan Cable, “The Advent of Surveillance Realism: Public Opinion and Activist Responses to the Snowden Leaks,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 763–81.

²⁸Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, “Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data’s Relation to the Contemporary Subject,” *Television & New Media* 20, no. 4 (2019): 336–49, doi: 10.1177/1527476418796632.

²⁹Amnesty International, “Bahrain, Kuwait and Norway Contact Tracing Apps among Most Dangerous for Privacy,” 16 June 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/bahrain-kuwait-norway-contact-tracing-apps-danger-for-privacy>.

citizenship. Theorists from Arendt to Lyotard have long discussed how boundaries of the public sphere serve to include some in the debate but exclude others, yet few have considered the role of automatons and artificial intelligence. Recently, Saudi Arabia offered a robot called Sophia Saudi citizenship. Ostensibly a PR media stunt designed to demonstrate a new Saudi leadership embracing technological modernity, the act drew both criticism and derision. Joanna Bryson, a researcher in artificial intelligence at Bath University stated: “It’s about having a supposed equal you can turn on and off. How does it affect people if they think you can have a citizen that you can buy?”³⁰ Although giving Sophia citizenship may seem like a unique absurdity, it is not. Indeed, although Sophia stole the headlines, she is but one robot. Thousands of anonymous online accounts and bots (short for robots) in Bahrain mobilized in 2011 to resist oppositional demands and express loyalty to the existing regime. The so-called political claims made by these untraceable accounts posing as citizens featured in the state newspapers.³¹

But Bahrain is the tip of the iceberg. Millions of automated accounts across the Gulf have dominated online discussions, repressing conversations by real people to give the illusion of public discussion. This process of “astroturfing” (laying artificial grassroots) seeks to replace genuine public discussion with top-down, artificial, regime-friendly, and politically sanitized messaging. We have seen the industrial-level production of sectarian hate speech by bots.³² Thousands of bots were used to boost support for the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar in 2017. When Donald Trump visited Saudi Arabia in 2017, bots masquerading as Saudi citizens trended a welcome message.³³

Indeed, the possibility of an autonomous, loyalist civil society astroturfing genuine public opinion has become a real possibility since 2011. Perhaps the most striking notion of this is the dystopian potential of a civil society simulacrum, one in which online performances of citizenship are neatly orchestrated by autonomous accounts to give the illusion of a functioning and healthy public sphere. The symbolic power of giving subservient automatons citizenship is the authoritarian fantasy: automatons can represent the ideal citizen, emotionless, subservient, programmable, and predictable. The absurdity of this automated civil society is highlighted by the fact that, in addition to hundreds of Bahrainis, thousands of *bidūn* in Saudi Arabia and across the Gulf remain without citizenship. The citizen is too critical, whereas the robot can be anyone a regime wants it to be. Citizens lose their legal and digital citizenship, while robots gain theirs.

Given the rise of automatons and the future direction of artificial intelligence (which will allow computers scripts to be better able to trick people into believing they are humans), a new ontology of assumptions is required, one in which the multitude of anonymous accounts discussing politics online ought to be questioned. Indeed, whereas ten years ago it might have been realistic to assume an anonymous account was a real person, now it is increasingly valid to assume an anonymous account is a bot or troll (Fig. 3). We have reached a place in Bahrain, and beyond, where trust has been so eviscerated by repression that one does not know if they are witnessing digital citizenship or authoritarian propaganda. This has been compounded by “fake news” and the rise of post-truth politics. The erosion of trust in institutions, and one another, has militated against the formation of strong resistance networks.

So, what can be said about the future of citizenship in Bahrain, digital or otherwise? Attempts to engage in challenges to authority or to encourage others to do the same are fundamentally prohibited in Bahrain. For the Al Khalifa, who wish to market Bahrain as a neoliberal hub, a place attractive to direct foreign investment, stability, or rather the illusion of stability, is critical. Therefore the only acceptable modalities of citizenship are those that lionize the regime, praise the achievements of the government, facilitate the transfer of capital, or facilitate the Internet of things. The web is only a performative space for the neoliberal and loyal citizen, who does not exceed the boundaries determined by a top-down desire to portray Bahrain as an oasis of stability. The digital realm has become functional, a means of facilitating transactions, enabling bureaucracy, and validating identity in the smart cities of the future.

³⁰James Vincent, “Pretending to Give a Robot Citizenship Helps No One,” *The Verge*, 30 October 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/10/30/16552006/robot-rights-citizenship-saudi-arabia-sophia>.

³¹Jones, “Social Media, Surveillance,” 84.

³²Marc Owen Jones, “Automated Sectarianism and Pro-Saudi Propaganda on Twitter,” *Tactical Technology Collective*, 18 January 2017, <https://exposingtheinvisible.org/resources/automated-sectarianism>.

³³Marc Owen Jones, “Saudi Twitter Robots Welcome Trump,” *AmanaTech*, 2017, <https://bahrainwatch.org/amanatech/en/investigations/trump-robots>.



Figure 3. Examples of automated Twitter accounts, made to look like real people, engaging in an astroturfing campaign. From Marc Owen Jones, "Automated Sectarianism and Pro-Saudi Propaganda on Twitter," Tactical Technology Collective, 18 January 2017, <https://exposingtheinvisible.org/resources/automated-sectarianism>.

It is no longer the heterotopia that it once was. Community and networks are in many ways seen as subversive; atomization and antisocial distancing are the new normal. Playing on the now ubiquitous "social distancing," antisocial distancing is the process of separating humans from each other to diminish human interaction and militate against collective "social" action. Perhaps this is all part of Gulf futurism, "the isolation of individuals via technology, wealth . . . the corrosive elements of consumerism on the soul and industry on the earth."³⁴ As making rights claims in the digital sphere becomes more difficult, so too does the possibility of digital citizenship, with its incumbent privileges and protections. Instead, "digital denizen" is perhaps more appropriate, for a denizen is someone who merely inhabits and exists in an environment, rather than someone who uses that environment to articulate and construct demands for recognition, rights, or identity. Not only are rights under attack, but so is the very space and ability to demand those rights.

³⁴Fatima al-Qadiri and Sophia al-Maria, "al-Qadiri and al-Maria on Gulf Futurism," *Dazed*, 14 November 2012, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/15037/1/al-qadiri-al-maria-on-gulf-futurism>.