

## News Parody and Social Media: The Rise of Egypt's Fifth Estate

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**Abstract:** The capacity of social media to copy, quote, cite, link to, transform, and otherwise engage in metacommentary on mainstream media was crucial to the roles it played in Egypt's 25 January uprising. More recently, news parodies like *El Koshary Today*, the Bassem Youssef shows and *Monatov* and have emerged to play similar roles. These parody news programs represent a shift of political parody and ironic humor from the private realm of interpersonal interactivity to the public sphere. They offer a continuation of the anti-structural elements that began in Tahrir Square and offer a carnivalesque experience that exposes and inverts traditional hierarchies. Collectively, these institutions may comprise an emerging "Fifth Estate, a watchdog on the news media, who are supposed to be the watchdog on government and corporate intrusions into people's liberty, but too often become their voices.

A thing is funny when — in some way that is not actually offensive  
or frightening — it upsets the established order.  
George Orwell (1954)

Shortly after Saad Ibrahim was sent to jail by the Mubarak regime on a trumped up charge intended to send a chill through the pro-democracy and human rights NGOs in the country, a bunch of us sat around in the Café Riche coffee house telling Saad Ibrahim stories. My favorite was the time Saad was traveling in Saudi Arabia. When his bus was stopped at a check point, he discovered that he had left his Egyptian passport at the hotel. Questioned by the kingdom's security forces, Saad asserted that he was Egyptian.

"Egyptian, eh?" sneered the officer in charge. "Tell us a joke."

So Saad did, and the guards laughed heartily and sent him on his way.

This story illustrates better than any assertion I could make the principle of the Egyptian character. In regional stereotypes, Egyptians are usually seen as the funniest of the Arabs. They are said to be *khafiift id-damm* (light of blood). According to Egyptian advocates under Roman rule were banned from practicing law because of their habit of making wisecracks, which the dour Romans thought would undermine the seriousness of the courts. Ibn Khaldun, the great 14th-century Arab social theorist, noted that Egyptians were an unusually mirthful and irreverent people (Messiri :3).

*Khafiift id-damm* was once described to me by an Arabic instructor as, "Our lives are so hard, so filled with absurdity that if we don't laugh, we would never stop weeping." Her characterization echoes that of Ahmed Amin, who claimed that "in his day" (1900-1950) jokes were used as a way to deflect serious consideration of the potentially devastating consequences of social and economic changes. He described coffee houses filled with the most vulnerable populations, such as unemployed laborers, following the latest jokes as

assiduously as they did the news or the latest cotton prices. Amin thus ties Egyptian jocularity to news, economics and politics. That this characteristic of *khafift id-damm* has long been especially associated with political humor is expressed by the Egyptian anthropologist Hamid Ammar:

It seems that the joke is used (by the Egyptians) to satisfy his internal feelings and comfort those who hear it. It also keeps him away from the (serious) subject, and even from reality itself. Hence, many of the clever Egyptian jokes act as release for the political and social conditions that afflict the people. They also act as an escape from anxieties and hence make life bearable. (Ammar 1961, quoted in Messiri :3-4.)

Much of this character is expressed in everyday life in political satire—jokes about politicians, the police, the president himself. But such satire has almost never been expressed in the public sphere.

But the story also illustrates a second point: that political humor, while everywhere abundant, has long been primarily oral. Oral texts are temporary, context-specific and limited in audience. Oral jokes spread because a hearer in one context wishes to share his or her pleasure by repeating the joke in another context. Unsuccessful jokes die quickly; successful jokes spread with viral efficiency, often being improved and elaborated as they travel. Because responsibility for the joke falls on some known individual in each telling, it is likely that particularly harsh jokes are never even told to the principle. And because they are anonymous and ephemeral, such jokes are usually perceived as not censorable and probably harmless.<sup>1</sup>

### **Political Jokes in Egypt**

When Nasser became president he wanted a vice-president who was dumber than he was, so as not to cause him trouble or pose a threat to his power, so he chose Sadat. When Sadat became president he too wanted a vice-president dumber than he was and picked Mubarak. Mubarak never chose a vice president because he couldn't find anyone dumber than he is.

Mubarak was for decades mocked as "La Vache Qui Rit" (the Laughing Cow) after the French processed cheese that appeared in Egypt in the 1970s as part of the *infitah*, the opening up of Egypt's markets to Western goods. The phrase captured a number of popular stereotypes. It implied that he was a provincial, a peasant, referencing his rural background. It portrayed him as stupid and lacking seriousness. It tied him to the flood of foreign goods created by the economic changes over which he presided first as vice-

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<sup>1</sup> One colleague told me worrying as she wrote her dissertation on the public memory of the transition from Nasserism to the Sadat's *infitah*, that if she published it she would not be able to have a career in Egypt. Her worries were resolved for her when black-clad men from an unidentified security agency broke into her home in the early morning and seized all her notes. She subsequently wrote the analysis using political jokes

president and then president. And it linked him particularly to a soft, gooey processed foreign cheese in contrast to the firmer white cheese of Egypt.

But darker jokes quickly emerged as Mubarak secured his control over the country through an ever more frightening security apparatus. Here's my favorite:

Azrael, the angel of death, is sent by God to finally collect Mubarak's soul. After more than two months, Azrael returns, bloodied, bruised, and broken. "What happened?" asked God. "Egyptian state security seized me. They threw me in a dark cell, starved me, beat me and tortured me for weeks and weeks. They only just released me." God turns pale and says, "You didn't tell them I sent you?"

Humor is rooted in incongruity. Someone telling a joke offers a story within a particular cultural frame, then suddenly pulls this frame aside, revealing one or more additional frames which audience members are shown as possible reframings or recontextualizations of the original content. When successful, the tension between the original framing and the sudden reframing results in an emotional release for the hearers expressed as smiles, amusement, and laughter (Beeman 2000).

The joke above follows a classic four-stage pattern. The first few lines *set up* the initial frame. Appreciating this cultural frame requires people to share the common knowledge expected of People of the Book: that there is an omnipotent God, that he sends his angel of death to all men at a time of his choosing. Azrael's unexpected return initiates a *paradox* by creating a second frame in which death is unexpectedly not inevitable but frustrated by the powerful Egyptian secret police. In the *dénouement* God's sudden expression of fright juxtaposes the initial and subsequent frames, creating tension as the omnipotent God is suddenly confronted with the secret police experienced by many Egyptians as also omnipotent. The fourth stage, *release*, is not structurally apparent in the joke itself but requires the competence and active participation of the audience as they "get" the joke and release the underlying cognitive tension in laughter or smiles.

The tension in telling a joke is always a social tension. The teller must assume the audience has the competence to get the joke. Multiple implications can be captured in briefly constructed frames. The second frame in this joke requires that one understands that state security is the central apparatus through which Mubarak was able to maintain power for thirty years. It assumes they know that like the Azrael, the state security can come for anyone, at any time, without warning. It assumes listeners recognize that to be arrested by the secret police is to be tortured. It requires that one understand that the state seeks God-like omnipotence; the denouement depends on the hyperbole that the state has achieved this omnipotence—so successfully that God's own omnipotence is second to it.

### **From Oral to Social Media**

After Mubarak dies, he meets his predecessors Sadat and Abdel Nasser in heaven. They ask him how he was killed, poison or platform. He angrily replies: "Facebook!" (*This joke assumes you are familiar with the fact that Sadat was shot while on a platform*)

*observing a parade and that Abdel Nasser's "heart attack" is widely rumored to have been unnatural)*

All media is social media, of course. The term social media is intended to contrast the centralized mass media with the decentralized media of Twitter, Facebook and the like. Social media refers to media designed to encourage interactivity, in which to own the means of consumption is to also own the means of production (Peterson 2003: 170). Social media offers some of the interactivity of oral media but also features elements of anonymity and extended reach associated with other forms of electronic media. Social media thus extended opportunities for political humor. One-liners circulated by text message and Twitter, while on fake Facebook pages and satirical fan pages were established for the country's leading politicians. The computer-based nature of the Internet also broadened the capacity for visual humor, encouraging video mash-ups depicting Mubarak and his entourage as characters in gangster movies or action films, or photoshopped images such as a *Star Wars* poster with Mubarak replacing the evil Emperor Palpatine.

But one of the defining capacities of social media is its intertextuality. The intertextual capacities of social media—the ease with which its users can copy, quote, cite, link to, transform, and otherwise engage in metacommentary on mainstream media and other sources of information (including many social media sites) was crucial to the roles it played in Egypt's 25 January uprising. Much of this metacommentary, from the very beginnings of the expansion of social media in Egypt, has involved political humor and parody.

The specific form of intertextuality created by hyperlinks, and especially by the power to cut and paste, or to embed, allows political humor to proceed on the web in very interesting ways. The initial frame may be established not by a telling or retelling but by a direct quote from a source site, while paradox and denouement are created by the blogger's satirical or ironic metacommentary. Subsequently, this new text, created by quote plus metacommentary may become the initial frame for a new humorous text. And among the most common fodder as the basis for such texts were quotes from state print and electronic media.

### **Tahrir Square**

Nowhere was this clearer than in Tahrir Square, where humor played a significant role as an expression of the Egyptian spirit struggling against fear of the regime. The jokes were plentiful—naming the growing pile of trash “National Democratic Party Headquarters,” signs saying “Please leave. I got married 20 days ago and I miss my wife” or “Please leave. I want to get a haircut.”

What is particularly interesting for our discussion here is the number of such jokes that are constructed as commentaries on state news reports. When newly-appointed Vice President Omar Suleiman was reported as having accused protesters of having "[foreign agendas](#)," my young people showed up to the square with plain blank notebooks

representing their agendas. And one protester posted a video of his friends eating sandwiches of cheese and bread in response to the state television report that protesters were foreign agents, paid with \$100 in Euros and meals from Kentucky Fried Chicken, laughingly claiming they'd sent their bribes to private accounts in Switzerland (Sussman 2011). People holding handmade signs about Facebook and Twitter were photographed with cell phones, uploaded to Facebook pages and their locations tweeted. Remediation was everywhere.

For the protesters and many of those watching and supporting them, Tahrir represented in miniature the free nation they aspire to. Without leaders, elected or otherwise, but with high energy, charismatic organizers, people stepped forward and offered their skills where and when needed. Many social processes including revolutions and uprisings, have liminal stages, in which the structures of everyday life of the immediate past have been disrupted or overturned, but new structures have not yet emerged to replace them, a situation Victor Turner termed "antistructure." The creative energy and camaraderie experienced by the protesters in Tahrir Square is a common social experience in liminal states, an intense feeling of community, social equality, solidarity, and togetherness experienced by those who live together in a site in which the normal social statuses and positions have broken down. According to Turner, these periods of anti-structure can't last. The fate of any type of antistructure and *communitas* is an inexorable "decline and fall into structure and law" (Turner 1969a:132). Yet while the *communitas* and antistructure of Tahrir have ended, no new structure has yet emerged. Egypt is engaged in an ongoing struggle between multiple visions of a future Egypt, producing economic, social and political uncertainties.

In this period of uncertainty, Tahrir Square has become a key symbol in contemporary Egyptian political discourse. For many Egyptians, the eighteen days in Tahrir Square *was* the revolution, and contemporary public political practices are evaluated, justified and rejected on the basis of whether or not they are perceived to be an extension of the spirit of Tahrir Square.

### **From Viral to Mainstream: Bassem Youssef**

The Bassem Youssef shows arose out of the effervescence of Tahrir Square. Dr. Bassem Youssef is a medical doctor—a cardiothoracic surgeon—who participated in the Jan. 25th uprising, tended wounded after the Battle of the Camels, and was appalled by the performance of the Egyptian official media. His ability to deliver sarcasm is superb even in Egypt, where this has long been a performance art, and with the encouragement and assistance of several friends, he created *Bassem Youssef's B+*, a five-minute broadcast on the model of the US *Daily Show*.

His brand of humor—overtly inspired by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert—indexes and offers metacommentary on Egyptian media. Like the US shows it emulates, Bassem Youssef's *B+* offers "an experiment in journalism" that "uses techniques drawn from genres of news, comedy, and television talk to revive a journalism of critical inquiry and advance a model of deliberative democracy" (Baym 2005).

The YouTube show was an unparalleled success. The record set by *B+* as the highest viewed channel in Egypt, with well over 33 million views, is unbroken. It is so far the only Arabic YouTube channel in the Middle East to have commercial sponsors (eight) (El-Wakil 2011). According to press accounts, Egyptian and Gulf TV networks fought over a contract with him, but he insisted his network be Egyptian, and supportive of the revolution.

During Ramadan 2011 his new half-hour show began airing twice a week on ONTV, one of the two major independent networks. The new program was titled *El Bernameg* (“The Show”) because, he quipped, “we couldn’t find a better name...or a worse one.” The new half-hour show started with a criticism of Syrian official media for operating the same way Egyptian official media does, and just kept being funny all week long, mocking such things as the Arab world’s silence over the ongoing atrocities in Syria, the inability of Egypt to get convicted businessman Hussein Salem extradited from Spain, the ongoing ambiguity of the interim government, and more. Youssef even tackled the controversy surrounding billionaire tycoon Naguib Sawiris, who owns the ONTV network airing Bassem Youssef’s show. Like its models, the US *Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, Youssef also features new books on the show and interviews guests. *El Bernameg* topped the ratings during the critical Ramadan period, when Muslims traditionally spend the evenings at home with their families, new shows are introduced, and viewing figures are at their highest. Advertisers include blue-chip companies such as Coca-Cola.

As the first media personality to transition from a massively successful YouTube show to a popular TV channel, Youssef has become a media phenomenon in Egypt. Through a partnership with YouTube, producer ONTV earns \$1 for every 1,000 unique views online, and the show had more than 27 million views by the end of its first season. The show is cheap to make, produced mostly by unpaid interns.

There are, of course, at least two types of news parody. Historically, news parody has tended to involve invented news, silly stories that were narrated with all the characteristics of straight news. In the U.S. this goes back at least to Sam Clemens, who supposedly twice had to flee for his life when his satires were taken for true news stories (Sanborn 1990) and has had many subsequent incarnations, most recently *The Onion*. In Egypt, this genre was introduced in an on-line newspaper called *El Koshary Today*, which began publishing in Dec. 2009 and apparently suspended publishing in Fall 2011.

Both forms of parody depend on mimesis. As Colleen Cotter pointed out recently, the power of parody news depends on how mimetic its structure and style are with mainstream news (2011). Former *Onion* editor-in-chief Rob Seigel has said that the journalistic form is “the vessel....It has to look like real journalism to create the comedic tension between what is being said and how it is presented” (Wenner, 2002). Dominick Boyer and Alexei Yurchak (2010) go further, arguing that part of the power of discourses that “imitate and inhabit the formal features of authoritative discourses” is their very ambiguity, so that “it [is] often difficult to tell whether it [is] a form of sincere support,

subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.” The humor of parody news derives from this tension between genuine and spurious.

What makes the humor of shows like *Al Bernameg* interesting is not simply that they parody the news but that they use actual news reports (and newsmakers) to create humor. This is done through a series of metacommentaries that weave news clips and metacommentary by the show’s main characters together to create a new, entertaining narrative.

In one episode of *B+*, for example, Youssef dialogues with footage of actor Talat Zakariya from another talk show:

*Zakariya: You must have heard what's happening in Tahrir Square.*

*Youssef: No! What? What?*

*Zakariya: Drums and horns and dancing...girls...and boys...and drugs...and full sexual relations.*

*Youssef (on the phone to someone): Didn't I tell you we need to go to Tahrir Square? Dude, they're saying there's music and women and sex, and we're sitting here? (looks up and sees camera) Sorry, sorry. (adopts professional television presenter character) Mr. Talaat, is there a video that proves what you're saying? [Cut to Belly-dancing video]*

As Baym (2007) says, such shows blend “postmodern stylistics with a modernist ethos of rational-critical dialogue.”

Remediating news in this way is not only funny, it offers viewers alternative ways to think about the news they view in the mainstream media. According to Elliott Gaines, the “narrative continuity constructed from rebroadcasts of news stories, told with the intent to entertain, ironically informs the audience of the significance of events whose meanings are obscured in conventional broadcast journalism” (2007: 81).

### **What's It Mean?**

Programs like *El Bernameg* are part of a growing global trend that includes such programs as *The Daily Show* and the *Colbert Report* in the U.S., *Chaser's War on Everything*, *The Norman Gunston Show* and *Newstopia* in Australia, *Les Guignols de l'info* in France, *Headliner* in Hong Kong, *Striscia la Notizia* in Italy, *The Daily Show Nederlandse Editie* in the Netherlands, *Late Nite News* in South Africa. Harrington (2012a) argues that these trends are related to McNair’s (2006) claim that the ways people interact with information is undergoing a global transformation; information moves faster, with less predictability, along paths that are more vernacular, less hierarchical, and less subject to ideological control. Parody news in particular “injects chaos” into efforts by commercial or state news media to produce coherent accounts of events structured by a particular ideology (Harrington 2012a).

In general, studies of news parody around the world have claimed that news parodies simultaneously parody media and politics. In doing so, they accomplish two things. First, they expose and undermine the textual conventions by which TV news and current affairs programs construct authentic representations of the world. Second, news parody programs deploy those very textual conventions to sabotage the cultural authority of the public figures who appeared on them, whether in person or through remediation.

Studies of news media have received considerable attention in the field of political communication in the US over the past decade because of their seeming ability to interest an increasingly inattentive audience in political news, and because they reopen the possibility of a journalism of critical inquiry not present in most state-sponsored and commercial news media. While these studies show that people consume political comedy shows primarily to be entertained rather than to be informed (Baum, [2003](#); Prior, [2003](#)), such programs may have an impact on public knowledge about politics. Some find this impact to be positive. Hollander (2005: 410) and Young ([2004a](#)) found that viewing news parodies could improve political knowledge. Other studies suggest that these programs can promote cynicism, and a loss of faith in specific political candidates, in the media, and in the electoral system itself (Baumgartner and Morris 2006).

News discourses provide contemporary societies with some of the functions played by myths: they offer authoritative accounts in a formalized language that symbolically dramatize breaches of normative social order (Arno 2009). The cultural order encoded in these myths in turn supports the broader social order. News satires expose the mythological function of news by making explicit the social values expressed implicitly in news stories.

This has a significant political dimension. “By employing irony these news satires provide a social critique of people and institutional power” (McCue 2009). These kinds of politically significant parodies of authoritative discourses are particularly likely to emerge when changing ideological conditions and social, economic and political tensions produce situations of “hypernormalization” (Boyer and Yurchak 2010) in which public discourse becomes increasingly polarized around narrow definitions of acceptable social, economic and political action. Under these conditions, print and online news parody can surmount the rhetorical chill that falls over public culture, and serve as a site for developing new meta-discourses (Achter 2008).

But one could easily make the argument that such “hypernormalization” has existed for twenty years or more in Egypt. Part of the reason no one saw the revolution coming is that Egyptian public discourse had settled into a kind of predictable complacency, even though private discourse remained quite critical, and irony abounded. Public parodic discourses were contained by Egypt’s broad but sporadically enforced censorship rules, and by a longstanding speech tradition of according increasing respect to people in status positions.

So why Egypt? And why now?

The emergence of news parody, particularly in Bassem Youssef's show, has to be seen as part of Egypt's experimental moment. This is a period in which

social innovators have found many new politically powerful uses for digital media; the mainstream media finds itself in a period in which the political order that governed it for so long is gone, and no firm new order has yet emerged. Many social actors seek to organize a new national mediascape as close as possible to the old, while others seek to innovate, to borrow practices from elsewhere in the global mediascape and localize them. New narratives, and counternarratives of revolution are everywhere, and the shape of the new order remains ambiguous, unpredictable and shaped by the very narratives the various media produce out of their own uncertainty (Peterson 2011).

*El Bernameg* represents a shift of political parody and ironic humor from the private realm of interpersonal interactivity to the public sphere. It offers a continuation of the anti-structural elements that began in Tahrir Square and produces a carnivalesque experience that exposes and inverts traditional hierarchies.

One way in which this process operates in *El Bernameg* is by desanitizing public figures. The ability of Egyptian public figures to laugh at themselves is completely unknown, and even hard to imagine. Whereas state news media, and most commercial news media tend to allow high status figures to control their representations, shows like *El Bernameg* challenge those public personas. The response to these challenges can create a new public perception about a social actor. The show, in other words, can act as a touchstone that establishes who is revolutionary, and who is reactionary.

Take the case of TV hosts Tawfiq Okasha and Sheikh Khaled Abdullah, two of his favorite subjects. Tawfiq Okasha, owner of Al-Faraeen Television is a conspiracy theorist and counterrevolutionary pundit who has been called "Egypt's Glenn Beck" (Chammah 2012). Sheikh Khaled Abdullah on the Salafi *Al-Nas* channel similarly blames Egypt's troubles on foreign agents (he blamed Iran for the Port Said soccer riots). Clips of both are featured frequently (Tawfiq on the very first episode), with Youssef wryly puncturing their accounts, and poking fun at their convoluted logic and hyperbolic modes of expression.

The two men retaliated on the air, calling him names and accusing him of lying. Youssef was accused of being against Islam, and deliberately seeking to keep Egypt unstable. At one point, Abdullah dared him to appear on his talk show but quickly retracted the invitation when it became clear Youssef was going to accept. Amr al-Leithy offered both TV hosts a chance to debate on his show *Wahed men El-Nas* (One from the People), but again Abdullah declined.

By contrast, Moataz Matar host of *Mahat Misr* ("Cairo Station) on Modern Misr television agreed to appear on *El Bernameg* after Youssef made fun of him, and played along with his host. As a result, Okasha and Abdullah come across as hidebound characters from the "old" Egypt, while Matar is a hip part of the new.

Moreover, for Youssef part of the meaning of his show is that it represents a kind of modernity previously unavailable in Egypt. The existence of the show, and its success, becomes emblematic of modernity, adding Egypt to the list of mostly Western democratic nations that have popular news parody shows. Similarly, Youssef has ambitious plans for his show's second season, which he hopes to tape before a live audience at a theater in central Cairo. This formula, though common in the US, is unprecedented in the Arab World, but Youssef "insists that Egyptian audiences deserve this" (El-Wakil 2011). This evaluative statement draws attention to the ways in which El Bernameg is positioned as something that indicates Egypt's post-Mubarak progress.

## **Conclusion**

Hariman argues that news parody is an important resources for creating and sustaining democratic public culture. "[B]y exposing the limits of public speech, transforming discursive demands into virtual images, setting those images before a carnivalesque audience, and celebrating social leveling while decentering all discourses within the 'immense novel' of the public address system," parody creates a kind of laughter "which is the shock of delighted dislocation when mediation is revealed" (Hariman 2008).

And Reilly (2011) suggests that as parody news becomes institutionalized it creates the possibility of emerging as part of a *Fifth Estate*, a watchdog on the news media, who are supposed to be the watchdog on government and corporate intrusions into people's liberty, but too often become their voices.

In a sense, social media has already emerged to a significant extent as a space for critical metacommentary on the media. But given the traditional structures of Egypt's media as voices of the regime, the emergence of such a fifth estate could become an important factor in the new Egyptian polity.

Ultimately, news parodies like *El Koshary Today*, Bassem Youssef's YouTube and ONTV shows and the short-lived *Monatov* represent a significant shift of political parody and ironic humor from the private realm of interpersonal interactivity to the public sphere. They offer a continuation of the anti-structural elements that began in Tahrir Square and offer a carnivalesque experience that exposes and inverts traditional hierarchies. Collectively, these institutions may comprise an emerging watchdog on the news media, who are often seem all too eager to settle back into their roles as .

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