

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

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Stop me if you’ve heard this one.

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?”

This joke 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.

One of the crucial things but understudied aspects of social media leading up to, during, and after the uprising that led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak is the capacity of social media to extend political humor in two significant ways.

First, social media extended the capacity of joke tellers to reach very large audiences without sacrificing the social intimacy created by the sharing of jokes since reposting and retweeting allows people to “share” in ways very different than broadcast media and publication.

Second, social media allows humorists to share new forms of jokes in which the set up is created through remediation, a quotation or transformation of an already

existing media text, especially a news story, which serves to establish the initial frame on which the joke plays.

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. 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.

Nowhere was this clearer than in Tahrir Square, where political humor of many kinds 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.

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.”

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.

El Bernameg extends from TV to YouTube. 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 but enthusiastic interns.

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. 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).

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.

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 parody 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.

As an anthropologist, I am very concerned about analyses of media that take Western, often particular Western, media experiences as normative for purposes of generalization. Phrases such as “we live in an era in which *information moves faster, with less predictability, along paths that are more vernacular, less hierarchical, and less subject to ideological control*” raises the question “who is we”? 80 percent of Egyptians, some 60 million people, do not have regular access to any of the Internet technologies these scholars are referring to, and no real expectation of having such access in the next decade. 40 percent of people in Egypt have no access to satellite or cable television stations like ONTV. They continue to rely on the ideologically sanitized news of state TV and state-subsidized newspapers.

So why Egypt? And why now?

I want to suggest four ways to understand the meaning and success of El Bernameg.

First, 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.

Second, EB forces public political and media figures to construct new kinds of public personas through mediated and direct engagement. 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. When TV hosts Tawfiq Okasha and Sheikh Khaled Abdulla retaliated on the air, calling Youssef names and accusing him of lying, being against Islam, and deliberately seeking to keep Egypt unstable, and refuse to meet with him, they expose themselves as stiff, artificial and fearful of engagement. 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, thus appearing reasonable and engaging.

Third, EB seeks to resist a return to the hypernormalization that organized media before the uprising, and to which many media outlets seem eager to return.

Fourth, by its very existence, EB 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.

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.

There is no certainty EB will survive for long. Similar projects such as El Kosary today and Monatove—have languished for lack of resources and interest.

And 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