

Egypt's Jon Stewart: Humorous Political Satire and Serious Culture Jamming

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With the upsurge of political resistance in January 2011, politics became the focus of the majority of Egyptians. In such troubled times, political satire is often used as a form of revolt that serves to publicly express feelings and challenge the course of action. A new type of political satire emerged via Bassem Youssef's YouTube show that earned him millions of viewers in just a few months. Shortly after, Youssef was dubbed "Egypt's Jon Stewart" and started to present his popular television show *Al-Bernameg*. The show mocked politicians and parodied mainstream media in Egypt. This was a new phenomenon that elicited controversial feedback, with some critics stating that the show simply provided satirical social and political commentary, while others arguing that the content was inappropriate for broadcast television. This article qualitatively analyzes the program's content and format to explore instances in which the show deconstructs dominant political discourses and ideologies disseminated by Egyptian mainstream media.

Keywords: satire, Egypt, media, political entertainment, social media, television, culture jamming, politainment, Middle East

Satire is a ridiculous form of dissent that faces a ridiculous form of propaganda. In a society infested by propaganda, satire is the only thing that makes sense.

—Bassem Youssef (2014 [speech])

Satire stems from the Latin term *satura*, which means "a mixed dish" (Holbert, Tchernev, Walther, Esralew, & Benski, 2013), and it is one of the most misunderstood terms, with no one specific accepted definition of the word. According to Test (1991), satire is "a legitimate aesthetic expression of basic human emotions—anger, shame, indignation, disgust, contempt—emotions that are aroused by universal human behaviors—stupidity, greed, injustice, selfishness" (p. 5). Satire allows opportunities for social and artistic expressions that satisfy people's need for humor and play.

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Over the past few years, there has been a noteworthy surge of interest in satire and its contended capacity to influence social change (Rosen, 2012). Previous research on political satire suggests that anxiety is an important dimension of an individual's affinity for political humor, and it is used as a defense mechanism to relieve tensions and reduce anxiety (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011). With the upsurge of political resistance in Egypt in January 2011, politics became the focus of a majority of Egyptians. In such troubled times, political humor and satire are often used as forms of criticism and revolt that serve to publicly express feelings and challenge the course of action.

A new type of political satire emerged via Bassem Youssef's YouTube show that earned him popularity and millions of viewers in just the first few months after the January 25 revolution. Shortly after, Youssef, dubbed "Egypt's Jon Stewart," started to present his popular television satire show *Al-Bernameg (The Show)*, which was the first Internet-to-TV conversion in the Middle East and the first of its kind in Egypt.

Although humor, satire, and laughter are nothing new to Egyptians, the satirical TV show *Al-Bernameg*, a show that mocks politicians and parodies Egyptian mainstream news media, was a new phenomenon in Egyptian society. The show provoked controversial feedback, with some asserting that the show simply provided satirical social and political commentary and others arguing that the language was inappropriate for broadcast television. The show's host, Bassem Youssef, became the target of many legal complaints, and the authorities investigated him several times on charges of disrupting public order and insulting Egypt's political figures.

Drawing on culture jamming and political satire literature, this article argues that *Al-Bernameg* challenged the traditional transmission of political information and interrupted dominant waves of mainstream media messages, thus "jamming" the dominant Egyptian cultural sphere by presenting an alternative content and format that both entertains and informs. Youssef, not only challenged the traditional transmission of political information but also subverted deeply embedded ideas in the Egyptian culture.

According to previous cross-cultural research (Merkin, 2005; Najm, 2015) and Hofstede's cultural dimensions model (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), one important dimension that distinguishes Eastern/Arab cultures from Western cultures is power distance. Hofstede and colleagues define power distance as "the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" (p. 61). In a society like Egypt, where the idea of power distance is dominant, the idea of a comedian publicly ridiculing authority figures on TV was unheard of because of deference for seniority and high respect for hierarchy. Therefore, when Youssef poked fun at authoritative figures, he was not only jamming the political messages as presented by politicians and mainstream media discourse but also jamming long-standing cultural values (e.g., deference for seniority and respect for hierarchy) that are deeply rooted in Egyptian society.

Youssef's hybrid blend of humor, parody, and satire elicited a series of insightful conversations and debates in Egyptian political discourse—conversations that are enabled and enforced by the new media environment and audience engagement in social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Political Satire in Egypt and Media Censorship

Poking fun at oppressive regimes has been a fundamental part of Egyptian life since the pharaohs. While Egyptians may lack actual power to change their rulers, they do have substantial freedom to mock (El Amrani, 2011). Satire press was a common form of expression in late 19th and early 20th century in Egypt. The reliance of these early satirical newspapers on colloquial Egyptian rather than formal Arabic *Fus-ha* allowed for more exchange between written and oral disseminations. These satirical newspapers were read aloud in cafes and other public spaces and thus played a significant role in the popular culture (Fahmy, 2011). In the 1920s, political satire flourished in poetry, theaters, and magazines. Struggle for national independence was the main cause for satirists at that time. For example, *Rose-Al-Youssef* was a magazine that used satire to criticize both the Egyptian government and the British occupation and was suspended and prosecuted several times (Freedman, 2008).

The Egyptian media environment witnessed various changes in the 1990s and early 2000s in terms of media privatization, the spread of satellite television, and private opposition newspapers as well as the spread of the Internet (Khamis, 2008). However, Egypt's media, like most media in neighboring Arab states, suffered from years of tight government control and censorship that continued under Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship. Khamis asserts that, although the country witnessed relative liberalization and privatization of media over this period, Mubarak's government still imposed multiple political restraints on the media. Although various privately owned media outlets were prevalent in Egypt (Sakr, 2010), Mubarak's dictatorship regime muffled all forms of expression via various means. This government tradition of tight suppression created an atmosphere of self-censorship or one of fear, where journalists and activists who dared to overstep the red lines found out too late that there was a penalty (Sakr, 2010). For years, Egypt's state-owned media worked to legitimize Mubarak's autocracy (Cottle, 2011), while the state ensured, through its tight libel laws, that those who opposed the regime would land in prison (Shukrallah, 2009). There were also multiple incidents where reporters and activists disappeared, were kidnapped, beaten, or threatened for discussing taboo subjects, which included criticizing Mubarak and his family (ElGabry, 2014; Sakr, 2010, 2013).

Political Atmosphere Out of Which *Al-Bernameg* Was Born

In troubled times, political humor and satire are often used as forms of criticism and revolt that serve to publicly express feelings and challenge the course of action. During the 18-day Egyptian Revolution of January 25, 2011, mass protests occupied Egyptian streets, where millions of citizens protested against former president Hosni Mubarak, who kept the country under a tight dictatorship rule for 30 years. The sociopolitical and economic climate under Mubarak's regime was stifling. Elections lacked transparency, corruption infiltrated all government sectors, and political conditions allowed no free expression, protest opportunities, or even general political participation. Additionally, an emergency law that was in place since 1967 enabled media censorship and detention of citizens without formal charges as well as quashing protests ("Egypt: Extending State of Emergency," 2008). On the economic side, nearly 20% of Egyptians lived below the poverty line (United Nations Development Programme, 2008), making it increasingly challenging for impoverished Egyptians to satisfy their basic needs (Hassan, 2011). Such a stifling and depressing sociopolitical and economic environment, coupled with Mubarak's grooming of his

son Gamal to become his successor, were the main conditions that caused the anger of millions of Egyptians to erupt on January 25, 2011. The 18-day Egyptian revolution instilled Egyptians with hopes for a better Egypt, and millions of Egyptians chanted in the streets demanding bread, freedom, and social justice for all. As El-Hibri (2014) argues, "large crowds gathered, chanting and calling for the downfall of the regime, have since become almost synonymous with the actual square and the spirit that briefly gave a positive sheen to the notion of the Arab street" (p. 835).

For Egyptian heart surgeon Bassem Youssef, it was no different. Youssef was among the millions who filled Tahrir Square during the revolution. He was inspired to create his own show because he was tired of going home from Tahrir Square to watch Egyptian state media presenting a completely different picture from the realities he witnessed at the square (Stewart & *The Daily Show* writers, 2012). *Al-Bernameg* came to life in March 2011, when Youssef uploaded his episodes, titled *Bassem Youssef Show B+*, to YouTube. It started out as a one-man show, where Youssef, sitting behind a simple desk in the laundry room of his house, poked satirical fun at government-owned media's hypocrisy and lies via images and videos (Youssef, 2014).

There is no question that social media played a significant role in the January 2011 Egyptian revolution in terms of resource mobilization, disseminating information, and communicating with the outside world (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Youssef used this very same medium to introduce a new form of critical political programming in Egypt. In its first three months alone, Youssef secured more than 5 million views online ("About Bassem," 2014) and later reached a whopping 200 million online hits (Youssef, 2014). The show was welcomed by thousands of Egyptians who felt that Youssef's show gave them voice and expressed their opinions on events occurring in Egypt at the time. Thus, inspired by Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, Youssef was able to apply the social media tools that were so significant during the Arab uprisings to offer Egyptian and Arab viewers their first political satire show (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2014). Soon after, Youssef was offered a budget of half a million dollars to convert his online show into a television show for the privately owned Egyptian network, ONTV. After the second episode was aired, Youssef's show became the number one show across the Arab world (Youssef, 2014). In sum, Youssef's show revived political satire, which had slowly vanished in Egypt, thanks to decades of tight government control and censorship. Not only did Youssef bring back the genre, but he was the first to introduce television political satire in Egypt and the Arab world.

Political TV Satire and Political Entertainment

The boundaries between news and entertainment, and between public affairs and pop culture, have become difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate. At the intersection of those borders sits *The Daily Show*, a hybrid blend of comedy, news, and political conversation (Baym, 2005). Academic and public interest in "satire TV" has been growing in the United States in recent years, and political television satire is increasingly gaining attention, thanks to its growing audience and suspected political influence on young viewers (Coleman, Kuik, & Van Zoonen, 2009). Political entertainment is a genre that is entertaining but also includes political information and ideas (e.g., Compton, 2009; Jones, 2010; Roth, Weinmann, Schneider, Hopp, & Vorderer, 2014).

Although political entertainment (*politainment*) shows, also called entertainment news, often cover public affairs, research indicates that the audience consumes politainment shows primarily for their entertainment value and not so much for their informative value (Brewer & Marquardt, 2007). Yet recent studies on the effects of politainment news (e.g., Feldman, 2013; Kim & Vishak, 2008) suggest that these programs affect viewers' knowledge and attitudes regarding public affairs.

Several studies in the United States have examined and critically analyzed the content of *The Daily Show*. Studies have analyzed the show's format and content (Baym, 2005; Brewer & Marquardt, 2007; Feldman, 2013; Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007; Jones, 2010; Warner, 2007), usage by young people (Landreville & LaMarre, 2011) and effects on candidate evaluations (Young, 2004), political knowledge (Hollander, 2005), political gratifications (Holbert et al., 2013), political attitudes (Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009), and political participation (Brewer & Cao, 2006). For example, Brewer and Marquardt (2007) examined the content of interviews and the framing of the mock news stories presented in 52 episodes and found that the show educated viewers about politics and encouraged them to think critically about traditional news. In addition, studies have used various audience research methods, such as surveys and experiments, to understand the effects of the show on its audience's perceptions, knowledge, and political engagement (e.g., Becker, Xenos, & Waisanen, 2010; Feldman, 2013; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009). Other studies have used surveys to examine the characteristics of the audience that is turning in to view this genre. For example, Hmielowski et al. (2011) examined predictors of political TV satire exposure and identified age, exposure to liberal cable news programming, and affinity for political humor as important predictors. Their study supported previous research findings that age is a negative predictor of political TV satire viewing. In addition, the study found that beyond age and other demographics, individual differences, such as the need for humor and affinity for political humor, are important predictors for consumption of political TV satire. Hence, the political satire genre has received much attention from researchers over the past few years to explore the role this genre plays in society by answering questions about its content, utility, and exploring some of its possible impacts.

Globalization and the Localization of *The Daily Show*

Political satire is used in many countries across the globe—for example, Turkey (Dinc, 2012), India (Kumar, 2012), Iran (Semati, 2012), and Hungary (Imre, 2012)—to criticize political figures and current issues using various media. In Denmark, for example, political satire has a long tradition in Danish public service television that directs its sting at powerful politicians and ridicules the media's dominance in society (Bruun, 2012). In Zimbabwe, journalists and civil society activists in the diaspora have employed political cartoon humor to raise attention for and awareness of the political situation in their country (Kuhlmann, 2012). Additionally, Canadians increasingly use social media to circulate political satire during events, such as the federal election in 2011 that was characterized by a growing collection of satirical content created by amateur producers looking to circulate their critiques to a wider audience (Reilly, 2011).

American shows, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, are recognized among Americans for their comedic criticisms of mainstream media and society and how they are "using humor to expose hypocrisies in media coverage, illuminate inconsistencies, and facetiously reveal folly" (Anderson &

Kincaid, 2013, p. 171). Several countries have imported the political satire format of the American television program *The Daily Show*. According to Baym (2005), political satire shows such as *The Daily Show* can be considered as a new form of critical journalism, one that relies on satire to accomplish what the mainstream media are no longer willing to pursue. The format and style of *The Daily Show* have been adopted in several countries around the world. Kleinen-Von Königslöw and Keel (2012) explained how the German adaptation of *The Daily Show*, the *Heute show*, is allowing for a greater degree of playfulness and attracting a new, young audience to the genre and to politics in general. In Iran, the *Parazit* is the localized Iranian format of *The Daily Show*. *Parazit* is a weekly Persian-language satire news show that is often dubbed *The Iranian Daily Show*. The show is new to Iranian political culture, and it has become an important place for Iranian expats and those in exile to engage in a televisual interaction (Semati, 2012). In India, *The Week That Wasn't* is a show that launched in 2006, inspired by the successful format of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. The Indian show follows the format of humorous video montages of news footage, fake reporters pretending to do on-location reporting, and fake "experts" pontificating on news events of the day or week. According to Kumar (2012), this show and similar ones that are based on successful Western formats, "Indianize" themselves, find audiences at a new cultural site, and adapt themselves to India's cultural environment in distinct ways. This is exactly what Youssef was able to accomplish with *Al-Bernameg*; he was able to Egyptianize and Arabize the format and style of *The Daily Show* to cater to Egyptian and Arab audiences.

Political Satire and Culture Jamming as a Means of Resistance

The concept of cultural jamming can be historically traced down to Russian theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of *carnival* (Robinson, 2011), where individuals "subvert what is authoritative, rigid, or serious through discussions and opinion postings—verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed, and indecent words and expressions may be used" (McLean & Wallace, 2013, p. 1520). Lasn (1999), who is a media activist and the founder of Adbusters Media Foundation, described culture jamming as creating alternative ideas by active groups and individuals to resist consumerism and commercial culture with the aim of transforming society. Harold (2004) explains that the term refers to the disruption, interruption, sabotage, or blocking of existing transmissions controlled by the dominating powers of cultural life. Harold adds that cultural jamming is the "glutting' of the system; it is a ramping up of contradictory rhetorical messages in an effort to engender a qualitative change" (p. 192). Harold therefore asserts that cultural jamming should not be viewed as merely stopping corporate media: "Rather, it may be more useful to consider jamming as an artful proliferation of messages, a rhetorical process of intervention and invention, which challenges the ability of corporate discourses to make meaning in predictable ways" (p. 192). Culture jammers mostly use diverse tactics to interrupt and stop consumer-saturated messages spread by dominant multinational corporations (Warner, 2007).

Although cultural jamming targets consumerism, it has also been used to analyze political satire as an alternative for mainstream political branding messages. In his analysis of *The Daily Show*, Warner (2007) stipulates that Jon Stewart's news parody show, along with show writers and comedians, are political culture jammers who

disseminate dissident interpretations of current political events, potentially jamming the transmission of the dominant political brand message. Like other culture jammers, *The Daily Show* subversively employs emotional and aesthetic modalities similar to those employed by political branding itself, thus interrupting it from within. (p. 19)

Drawing on culture jamming and political satire literature, this article argues that *Al-Bernameg* challenges the traditional transmission of political information, thus "jamming" the dominant Egyptian cultural and political spheres. The show broadcasts opposing interpretations of current political views and events, and, by doing so, it is interrupting and jamming the dominant political and mainstream media messages and also challenging deeply rooted ideas in Egyptian society's culture. This article qualitatively analyzes the program's content as a popular cultural artifact created in Arabic to explore instances in which the show deconstructs dominant political discourses and ideologies disseminated by Egyptian mainstream media. The article also aims to identify whether the show is adapting the same political cultural jamming techniques that the American version, *The Daily Show*, is using. The article draws on critical discourse analysis to describe and synthesize the show's content and to answer questions such as, What are the cultural jamming features implemented in *Al-Bernameg's* form and content? What are the major themes/topics in the discourse, the satire techniques, and format features applied in the show? Finally, the article enhances the debate of globalization and the localization of television format by drawing some conclusions—from a cross-cultural perspective—on the similarities and the differences between the American and the Egyptian Jon Stewart TV shows.

The analysis relies on a purposive sample of *Al-Bernameg's* popular episodes that elicited high levels of controversy in the Egyptian discourse and also gained the highest viewing rates. The selected episodes were drawn from the show's three seasons that aired from 2011 to 2014 on three different television stations: ONTV, CBC, and MBC.

Cultural Jamming Features in *Al-Bernameg's* Form and Content

The boundaries between news and entertainment have become difficult to distinguish. New concepts, such as politainment, are used to describe a new world where politics and entertainment have collapsed into one another. *The Daily Show* is "a hybrid of comedy and authentic news that exploits mainstream news media, adding a comic layer of interpretation, and pointing out the failures of conventional standards of news reporting" (Gaines, 2010, p. 129).

Politainment: Blend of Entertainment and News

Egypt's *Al-Bernameg* falls under this same genre and represents what is known as politainment, a genre that Egyptians have never seen on Egyptian TV before. *The Daily Show* uses the newscast parody format to mimic the forms used for political branding in mainstream news media. This "seemingly weighted format then allows for an automatic contrast with the humorous content, leading to a state of incongruity, a prerequisite for most humor" (Warner, 2007). Similarly, *Al-Bernameg's* format represents a disruption of the news formats that mainstream Egyptian TV channels use to convey political messages. Resembling *The Daily Show*, *Al-Bernameg* consists of a hybrid blend of comedy, news, and political

discussions through which Youssef plays the role of an anchor to present a selection of the week's news. Similar to *The Daily Show*, Youssef relies on a talented team of young writers, mock reporters, and previous news reports to present a weekly dose of humor, parody, and satire, eliciting a series of insightful conversations and debates in the Egyptian political discourse. News is usually illustrated with a photo or graphic and usually accompanied by humorous word play or a montage of photos or video clips.

In addition, the show uses several entertainment tools, such as dancing, songs, jokes, and so on. For example, in a series of episodes, Youssef criticized the Egyptian presidential elections in 2014 and the potential candidates, and in one such episode, Youssef portrayed the elections as a wrestling arena and used funny pictures and video montages of previous statements from candidates to mock their election programs and show the candidates as wrestlers, commenting on their slight chances to win the elections (Youssef & Khalifa, 2014, Season 3, Episode 11). Another example of the use of humor in the show was the character Gamaheer (the masses), whose love tales were symbolic of current politics in Egypt.

In one segment (Youssef & Khalifa 2012, Season 2, Episode 22), Gamaheer talked about choosing between two lovers, symbolizing Egypt's postrevolution two presidential candidates: Ahmad Shafik, an affiliate of the Mubarak regime, versus Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member. Gamaheer said,

I just came out of a 30-year relationship [referring to Mubarak's regime]. . . . After that I got to know a new guy [referring to Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood president at the time], but after awhile I felt that he changed; he doesn't treat me the same way he used to . . . he announced a constitutional declaration so as to control me (15:25).

The show used the Gamaheer character and the humorous situation to criticize the political crisis triggered when Morsi issued the constitutional declaration that gave him extensive powers, causing public outrage.

Using Bold Language

The show format was also new in its use of boldness and shock as a means of political satire. The language Youssef used in his criticism and satire was often informal, daring, and, sometimes, crossed the line for Egypt's conservative culture. For example, in one segment (Youssef & Khalifa, 2012, Season 2, Episode 4) Youssef showed pro-Muslim Brotherhood supporters attacking anti-Morsi protesters who were protesting at the Presidential Palace in objection to his rule. The pro-Morsi supporters were shown claiming that protesters were in the streets having sex, taking drugs, and drinking alcohol, among other things. After that, Youssef showed an over-the-shoulder graphic that substitutes the revolution's dominant motto of "bread, freedom, social justice" with "bread, freedom, and sperms," and he then sarcastically commented, "So wait a second. So these protestors had alcohol, hookahs, marijuana, drugs, and money? So you guys just needed a couple of belly dancers and five Gulf sheikhs to open a nightclub!" However, Youssef's bold and shocking language was not always welcomed by all Egyptians. In many instances, *Al-Bernameg* and Youssef were accused of sexual immorality for using sexual references, which was not common on mainstream Egyptian television.

Use of Video/Juxtaposition

Similar to *The Daily Show* and other localized versions of the show, such as the Iranian *Daily Show*, *Parazit*, *Al-Bernameg* successfully used video/juxtaposition in its political satire to mimic the mainstream news media (Semati, 2012; Warner, 2007). There was usually one over-the-shoulder video screen, similar to what is common on network and cable news shows. Often, Youssef would turn his view to the video and initiate a conversation on these video clips, stopping the video to pose questions and make comments. For example, in one episode, Youssef was criticizing mainstream media for airing leaked private phone calls by politicians, arguing that this violated their privacy and human rights. In this episode, Youssef aired a montage of video segments showing how prominent journalists and news media anchors were trying to defend the leaks as a new journalistic form (Youssef & Khalifa, 2014, Season 3, Episode 7). This strategic juxtaposing of video-clip segments sometimes indirectly reveals meanings by inviting the audience to draw their own interpretations and conclusions that probably would have been very hard to reach by watching these clips independently. Juxtaposition of a series of video clips can also be used to highlight politicians' or media hosts' statements that seem to be illogical or absurd. For example, in one episode, Youssef mocked Morsi's supporters and then showed multiple clips of Islamic satellite channels sharing similar conspiracy theories that Egypt was facing a potential coup, orchestrated by Zionist-American organizations (Youssef & Khalifa, 2012, Season 2, Episode 4)

A Different Type of Host

Youssef himself was different than typical Egyptian hosts. He was a young, well-educated cardiac surgeon who left his successful medical career to pursue his media passion. He studied abroad in both American and German universities and was fluent in English. Many young Egyptians regarded him highly and perceived him as a nontraditional TV host, which increased his credibility. One important aspect of Youssef's effectiveness as a TV host was his ability to create community engagement. Previous research (Hmielowski et al., 2011) suggests that social functions of satire are an important dimension of an individual's affinity for political humor. According to this dimension, people use humor to connect with others and form social bonds by sharing inside jokes (in-joke) about their politicians and various political issues within their society. Youssef and his show successfully created an elevated level of community engagement among Egyptians, whether they were fans of the show or opponents. *Al-Bernameg* was the first political show in Egypt and the Arab world to feature a live audience and live interaction with them during the show. Furthermore, the show and its host expanded the discussion to online spaces. Numerous conversations and audience engagement were initiated in the show and continued in various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. That is, *Al-Bernameg* created a new format for audience engagement with Egyptian TV as it extended face-to-face interaction via a live audience to online social media domains. Youssef was very active in social media; his Twitter account (@Byoussef) had more than 9 million followers, and his show's YouTube channel has about 2.5 million subscribers and is the first Middle East YouTube channel whose subscribers exceed 2 million (Cohen, 2014; "YouTube Top 100," n.d.). Additionally, Youssef would initiate hashtags on Twitter and ask his viewers to interact and participate using these hashtags. For example, in one of his episodes (Youssef & Khalifa, 2014, Season 3, Episode 5), he asked viewers to tweet using a hashtag that was created to demand the return of one of his show's most controversial characters, Gamaheer. The character was taken off the show and Youssef encouraged

his audience to tweet the hashtag "bring back Gamaheer," and, in less than an hour, it became the number one trending hashtag on Twitter ("Return Gamaheer" hashtag, 2014).

Youssef's style not only attracted local attention but also gained him international recognition. The former host of *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart, on multiple occasions praised *Al-Bernameg* and its host for the political satire it introduced to critique current affairs in Egypt. In June 2012, Jon Stewart invited Youssef to *The Daily Show* and he told Youssef, "I do know a little something about the humor business; your show is sharp, you're really good on it, it's smart, it's well executed" (Abdelbari, 2013, para. 3). In June 2013, Stewart was Youssef's guest on an episode of *Al-Bernameg* in Egypt, as a result of the escalating level of criticism and pressure that *Al-Bernameg* and its host were facing at that time. Stewart told Youssef during the show, "If your regime is not strong enough to handle a joke, then you don't have a regime" (Gould, 2014, p. 172). In sum, Youssef's charisma, sense of humor, ease of communication, whether on TV or via social media, set him apart from the dominant yet traditional Egyptian and Arab media personalities.

Mocking the Mainstream News Media and TV Hosts

Similar to *The Daily Show's* parody news reports, many of the topics on *Al-Bernameg* were also covered by reports from fake correspondents or fake experts in the studio. The show's comedians acted as news reporters. The show also often criticized Egyptian mainstream media hosts. For example, the show used to air an array of real TV news media clips, with media hosts dramatizing Egypt's transition to democracy by saying things like, "Egypt is a catastrophe, Egypt is dying." Youssef would then respond by mocking the exaggeration of the news media. Youssef criticized the mainstream news media for promoting the idea of internal and external conspiracy and spreading fear among Egyptians before elections.

In one episode, Youssef showed how the word *mo'amra* (conspiracy) had been extensively used by various talk show hosts in mainstream news media by using fast-paced editing of short and intense video clips that include the word *mo'amra*. On another occasion, Youssef criticized the Egyptian news media's strong reaction and suspicious interpretations of a TV ad depicting a puppet called Abla Fahita. The Abla Fahita ad was heavily criticized in mainstream media, with claims that its content included hidden and suspicious codes that aimed to cripple Egypt's national security (Youssef & Khalifa, 2014, Season 3, Episode 2). In another episode, Youssef exposed Egyptian media's fake propaganda on a recent visit by Egypt's El-Sisi to Russia. The media had claimed that the visit focused on a significant weapons deal when in reality there was no such deal. Youssef mocked this media coverage and said "this 1960s-style propaganda doesn't work anymore" and ended with a final message to the media: "My dear media fellows, enough propaganda; please be sure of the sources you cite and please respect your audience's intelligence before you take us all to a dead end" (Youssef & Khalifa, 2014, Season 3, Episode 4).

Mocking Politicians and Parties Across the Political Spectrum

Previous political satire research suggests that a real satirist should not advocate for one specific political party and remain an "equal-opportunity attacker" by not being a consistent advocate of one political party over a long period of time (Holbert, 2013). Youssef and his show, which lasted three seasons,

continued to poke fun at Egyptian politicians and criticize various political parties along the spectrum. While this boldness gained Youssef millions of fans across Egypt and the Arab world, it also angered many conservatives, who were not used to political satire and to such open criticism of those in power.

Under former president Mohamed Morsi, Youssef was accused of damaging relations between Egypt and Pakistan after an episode where Youssef made fun of President Mohamed Morsi's hat that he wore as he received an honorary doctorate in Pakistan. He was also taken to court and formally accused of insulting the president and insulting Islam (Youssef, 2014). In a series of episodes, Youssef focused his satire on Morsi's international etiquette. He criticized everything from Morsi's broken English accent, his mannerisms among his international peers, and the language he used in his political speeches. In one episode, Youssef ridiculed Morsi for constantly checking his watch while the chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, was talking during a press conference. Youssef also criticized the language Morsi used in his political speeches as inappropriate for a president. For example, in one political speech, Morsi accused his opponents of conspiring to oust him: "I can see two or three fingers playing around in Egypt" (Youssef & Khalifa, 2013, Season 2, Episode 20, 36:00). Youssef criticized Morsi's choice of words by making a sexual reference, as if to insinuate that there are fingers touching someone's body

Youssef also criticized the proarmy government during interim president Adli Mansour's rule, which was the period following June 30, 2013, when President Morsi was ousted following mass protests in Egypt, backed by the Egyptian Army's support. In one of his most powerful episodes, just before the 2014 presidential elections, Youssef strongly condemned a government announcement of a military invention that could cure Hepatitis C, an epidemic in which Egypt ranks as the highest in the world, according to the World Health Organization (Gebrial, 2015). In this episode, Youssef played several clips showing military figures promising a radical cure of Hepatitis C by June 30, 2014, and Youssef satirically responded, arguing that this was a false promise that had nothing to do with scientific medical research (Youssef & Khalifa, 2014, Season 3, Episode 4). Perhaps the most significant segment of this episode was Youssef's mocking of the military's claim to have created a machine that diagnoses "Virus C" and AIDS without needing a blood sample from the patient. After showing a short clip with a patient walking in a hospital room, and a doctor focusing a small machine with a tall antenna toward the patient, while the anchor explained the invention, Youssef sat in his studio chair with a medical book in his hand and sarcastically said:

Sometimes science surprises us. As a doctor, I was definitely surprised, let alone the majority of Egyptians who heard the news. This is truly stunning! Someone just points an antenna toward you and can determine if you have AIDS or Virus C just like that! (22:44)

Yet after a long segment of jokes and satirical comments on the device, Youssef ended this episode on a very serious note, saying:

At the end of the day, we are just joking [on the show], but you are serious and you promise people And until this promise is fulfilled, I will stay here and remind the people of what happened every week, until we receive a worthy response. If the promise

is in fact true, then congratulations to all of us, but if it turns out to be a hoax, then what have you left for us to do on our show? (Bassem & Khalifa, 2014, Season 3, Episode 4, 43:22,)

Youssef's attacks of politicians from both sides of the spectrum angered many government officials and prominent politicians. Islamist media accused Youssef's show of betraying and insulting Islam, while the regime's media accused Youssef of working against the army and the country. When Morsi was overthrown in June 2013, Youssef poked fun at the new regime, and this time he faced a number of lawsuits and his show was jammed more than once while airing (Youssef, 2014). The mainstream media responded negatively to the show, describing Youssef as a clown. Youssef became the target of many legal complaints and was investigated by authorities several times on charges of disrupting public order and insulting Egypt's political figures. In April 2014, the show was stopped, and the reason, announced by the TV station (MBC MASR), was to avoid influencing voters during the Egyptian presidential elections; yet the show was banned altogether. In June 2014, Youssef announced the termination of his show, explaining that the pressure on him, his family, and MBC had become too great to handle. As Youssef explains, working the show was no easy task. "We had to work under constant threats of legal persecution" (Youssef, 2014 [speech]).

Conclusion

This article enhances the contemporary body of research on politics and satire, focusing on *Al-Bernameg* as a new form of satirical and politainment genre in Egypt and the Arab world. Youssef's show offered a unique media outlet and provided a powerful alternative voice and a novel format that blends politics with satire. This new television satire genre was able to jam the dominant Egyptian political discourse and traditional media culture through several jamming strategies in both form and content (e.g., focusing on logical contradictions, factual errors, exaggerations, fast video montage, harsh criticism).

Painter and Hodges (2010) argue that one satirical show, such as *The Daily Show*, can help ensure that other traditional media outlets, especially broadcast media outlets, are more accountable to the public and also help the audience become more media literate. Similar to *The Daily Show*, *Al-Bernameg* acted as a new form of critical journalism and a watchdog for mainstream media that mocked most TV talk-show hosts and criticized their contradictions and unprofessionalism on various occasions and over time. Using *The Daily Show's* video montage strategy for selected segments of mainstream media shows, Youssef was able to highlight moments of unprofessional journalism practices by selecting and accentuating certain segments of these shows and also comparing previous views to current ones to alert audiences to opinion flip-flop moments. Although Youssef, as satirist, conveyed his messages in forms of humor and jokes, the embedded satire in the show was bitter and tackled serious issues in Egyptian society. In fact, it would be unfair to describe *Al-Bernameg* as a simple humorous political show, given the serious culture jamming and subversion of ideas evoked by its content. Previous research on political satire (e.g., Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & de Vreese, 2015; Polk et al., 2009) suggests that it is more effective when it is serious and bitter (often called *Juvenalian* satire) than lighter forms of humor (often called *Horatian* satire). Because of differences in how information is processed in both light

and serious humorous messages, audience are more likely to perceive light humorous content as “just a joke” than less humorous content (Feldman, 2013).

Al-Bernameg also demonstrates how, in this globalized age, an international TV format can successfully be modified to fit a country’s specific political, cultural, and media landscape. Previous work on global media and the localization process—often referred to as *glocalization*—indicates that, although the format of global media is homogeneous, “the construction of their content is increasingly localized” (Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 99). *Al-Bernameg* is the Egyptian localized version that adopted the same format of *The Daily Show*, with the Egyptian version being another successful example of glocalization. In addition, Youssef, who is often described as Egypt’s Jon Stewart or the Jon Stewart of the Arab world, successfully adopted Stewart’s satire techniques, such as funny faces, bold language, body movements, and harsh criticism.

The popularity of the political satire genre in different societies opens the genre for a new, younger audience and raises hopes for a potential role of traditional TV in political participation and engagement (Hmielowski et al., 2011). Previous scholarship on the localized versions of *The Daily Show* that were discussed earlier (i.e., the Indian *The Week That Wasn’t*, the Iranian *Parazi*, and the German *Heute*) concluded that such shows were able to attract a new, young audience to the genre and to politics in general. *Al-Bernameg* is another case that further illustrates that this pattern also worked in Egyptian society. During its three seasons, one can argue that *Al-Bernameg* enriched political conversations and encouraged Egyptians, especially young ones, to engage and participate in a broad societal dialogue, using various social media platforms.

In addition, the expansion of discussion from traditional broadcast TV to a broader virtual discourse via social media platforms was clear in *Al-Bernameg*’s case and helped to amplify the effects of the show and its host. As Pearce and Hajizada (2014) argue, humorous media in the digital age with its viral content can have a much broader impact on societies compared with traditional media content. Humor is an effective way for dissidents to widely distribute their message and to reach out to audiences that are less politically engaged.

Although millions of viewers embraced *Al-Bernameg* for its revolutionary and novel style, the show encountered a lot of resistance from the government. The ability to “criticize power and question authorities has made political satire one of the first targets in press crackdowns and attempts to limit political freedom” (Farjami, 2014, p. 239). “I wonder what made a comedy show so uncomfortable for authority and its loyal media,” asks Youssef. “Why would sarcasm threaten them so much and why would people trust a comedy show more than a serious political show?” (Youssef, 2014 [speech]). Youssef argues that the answer is in the existing propaganda media, which fails to do its job of reporting the truth, working independently, and holding those in power accountable. “It [media] should demand transparency and it should breathe down the ruler’s neck for the sake of the people” (Youssef, 2014 [speech]).

Given Egypt’s long history of media control and lack of freedom of expression, it was, therefore, no surprise to see a novel political satire experience such as *Al-Bernameg* come to an abrupt end in 2014, in a country that continues to suffer from huge political, economic, and societal repercussions of the

January 25, 2011 revolution. One can argue, though, that a central gain of this revolution was not only its raising of Egyptian people's hopes for substantial social and political reforms but also raising their political awareness and engagement levels. One hopes that the future will see a reigniting of Youssef's show or similar political satire shows in Egypt and the Arab world. The short-term success that *Al-Bernameg* and Youssef experienced, with millions of viewers and social media followers, illustrates the need for such a genre in Egypt and the Arab world.

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