The role of political satire and technology in the liberalization of Egypt: 

The case of Bassem Youssef

Abstract

This analysis paper attempts to highlight the intersection of political satire and technology as a means of politically mobilizing young audiences in the Middle East. The bulk of the essay focuses on Egypt as a case study and uses Bassem Youssef as a primary example of both the successes and challenges of late-night satire in promoting political efficacy. His show, Albernameg, combined with the proliferation of smart phones, Internet access, and digital media created a powerful precedent of political resistance and protest. Youssef serves as a model for the potential that technology and humor hold in changing the domestic dynamics of Egypt and other countries in the region.

Due to the scarcity of academic research on Bassem Youssef’s effects on youth in Egypt, this essay draws on available research regarding American late-night comedy—notably Jon Stewart’s Daily Show and Stephen Colbert’s Colbert Report — and spotlights the parallels between these shows’ effects on American youth and Bassem Youssef’s impact on Egyptian youth. In a country with a cultural history of obedience to authority, Albernameg was a refreshing departure from the historical norm. Youssef’s clever, sharp criticisms of both the Morsi and Sisi regimes have opened doors for the next generation to imbue their society with a new culture of individualism, plurality, and liberalization.
Introduction

Humor has played a large role in the Arab world and its politics for centuries. Egypt’s history of employing humor as a form of governmental criticism can be traced back to the pharaohs. In fact, ancient Egyptians were so renowned for their humor that the Romans banned them from practicing law in the Roman Empire for concern that the Egyptians would adulterate the seriousness of the legal institution in Rome. As Khalid Kishtainy writes in his chapter of Civilian Jihad, “Many modern Arab thinkers adhere to the classical Arab notion—espoused by al-Jahiz (d. 868/92), probably the most distinguished medieval humorist—that humor is instructive and constructive.” Humor is even more adept for venting and circulating defiant ideas than poetry, an art inextricably tied to the Arabic language and often used as an outlet for social and political grievance. Humor can be liberating. It gives the average person power to deride and laugh at figures of authority and is considered “a weapon of the weak.” Humor is seen as a form of protection from the elements of authoritarianism—fanaticism, rigidity, and excess—and serves as an accessible tool to protest oppression. This idea of humor as an instructive and constructive force has its historical echoes in many places globally and was not limited to the Arab world. Monarchs across Europe employed jesters in their high courts for amusement. The jester’s proximity to the king put him in a position of great power. He could advise the king up front and in a way that most other men could not: by portraying glaring truths in a comical and palatable form.

Following the Middle Ages, Egypt anchored itself at the center of satire and humorous political commentary in the Arab world. The translation of Shakespeare and Molière’s works in the early 19th century provided the impetus for revamping comedy as a means of political communication. The mid-19th century gave rise to anti-colonial and anti-British journalism. In the early 1900s, the Ottoman officials were often the targets of jokes. By the 1920s, Lebanon and the surrounding areas of the Levant saw an increase in satirical publications. Following the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six Day War, satirical critique of Nasser and Arab dictatorship surged as poets, singers, and even clergy began employing humor as an outlet to express growing

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
9 Ibid. Pg. 54.
10 Ibid. Pg. 55.
frustration with the government. In fact, Nasser’s government perceived a threat in such humor, and became one of the only—if not the only—countries in the world with an intelligence unit dedicated solely to monitoring political jokes.\textsuperscript{11} Since Nasser, Egyptian bloggers, writers, and activists have used satire and humor aimed at the government to alleviate the resentment of citizens for the successive regimes.

Today, the entire world is full of modern-day jesters and political satirists. Late-night show hosts like Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, Trevor Noah and John Oliver have a large following, particularly among young Americans. These hosts are an excellent example of how political satire, when employed in a particular form, can greatly impact a populace’s political awareness and participation.\textsuperscript{12} Most importantly, studies have shown that political satire has a positive relationship with a populace’s political efficacy—that is, the belief in one’s own political competency and consequently that political and social change are possible.\textsuperscript{13} The impact these men have on modern youth has vast potential for the mass mobilization of civil society, which could be useful for political transformation in countries ruled by extremist governments—in the case of this essay, Egypt. As more studies continue to emerge on these show hosts’ effect on political processes, it can be expected that other countries will begin emulating their example within their own constituencies. This has already begun in many places worldwide, but perhaps one of the more notable figures in this modern emergence of Jon Stewart-like spinoffs is Bassem Youssef and his show, Albernameg (“The Show”).

**Digital Space and Growing Activism**

In a country whose media has historically been monitored and censored by the government, Bassem Youssef’s success in Egypt as a political satirist is an indication of the growing role of technology and the increasingly easy access to digital space in Arab society. His popularity shows that his views resonate with young Egyptians, which in turn has put pressure on Mohamed Morsi’s and Abdel Fatah al-Sisi’s respective governments to respond to the growing discontent amongst the populace. The development and use of political humor and satire often are, and should continue to be, incorporated into modern strategies of civil resistance. As Khalid Kishtainy notes in *Civilian Jihad*, “this task has been made easier with the development of the Internet and other technical means of mass communication, so widely spread throughout the Middle East and the Third World in general.”\textsuperscript{14} Before delving into Bassem Youssef’s career and achievements, it is beneficial to understand the dynamics on the ground in Egypt, particularly with concern to the Internet, social media, and the use of satellite and broadcasting technology.

In 2008, two Egyptian college students used social media platforms Twitter and Facebook to organize a strike in solidarity with textile workers from the Nile Delta region, giving birth to the Arab world’s use of social media as a mobilizing force and a “weapon of

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. Pg. 161.
\textsuperscript{14} Khalid Kishtainy, “Humor and Resistance in the Arab World and greater Middle East” in *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East* ed. Maria J. Stephan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 54.
opposition.”

Following Egypt’s example, other countries in the region such as Iran and Tunisia mimicked its tactics, displaying a force these governments could not ignore. As social media use proliferated, the Middle East saw a rise in Internet activism—Morocco, Turkey, and Palestine are a part of this trend. Tunisia and Egypt’s revolutions in 2010 and 2011 respectively, however, are two polished illustrations of the monumental role the Internet, and Facebook particularly, has played in organizing and executing mass demonstrations that eventually led to the overthrow of each country’s government.

The 25 January Revolution in 2011 in Egypt was organized on Facebook. More than one million people were invited to protest, and more than 100,000 responded to the event invitation with “attending.” This mobilization depicted the realization of what Linda Herrera and Rehab Sakr call “wired citizenship,” which is the use of cyberspace to create networks of digital civil societies. These spaces are where one can express discontent with government, official corruption, social inequalities, and actively engage in productive and democratic dialogue where voices are not silenced by heavy-handed governments or institutions. After years of social repression in Egypt, a movement manifested: 2008 provided the spark, and 2011 brought the full momentum of the “Facebook Revolution.” Since 2011, governments in the region have noted this growing digital trend and have begun to replicate these virtual forums as a means of political expediency, understanding that the Internet’s rapid penetration of the Middle East holds important implications, especially given the demographic makeup of Internet users.

According to Herrera and Sakr, the Internet penetration rate in the Middle East is 40 percent. As of 2012, the region saw its Facebook subscription reach 44 million users, of which three quarters were ages 16 to 34 and one third were female. Duly notable is that roughly 70 percent of the region is under 35 years old, which elucidates the potential power of Internet connectivity. In studies surrounding youth news consumption, 74 percent of young people in Egypt said they use the Internet to stay up-to-date on news and current events. Notably, with the evolution of the cellphone and development of the smartphone, the information that the Internet has to offer has become significantly easier to obtain.

The Internet aside, the Arab world has seen many changes in its broadcast media. The 1970s and 80s witnessed intense media censorship and control by the dictatorial regimes of the Middle East. Governments relied on these broadcasts as a primary pathway for propaganda and a means to maintain control over the people. However, Al-Jazeera began airing free-to-view satellite broadcasts in the 1990s and 2000s, which transformed the landscape and opened

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18 Ibid. Pg. 24.
20 Ibid. Pg. 2.
21 Ibid. Pg. 29.
doorways for competitive broadcasting business. Egypt loosened its media restrictions to a degree (but still actively monitoring content with its intelligence unit), while other Arab countries were slower to adapt. Nevertheless, with the change in broadcasting came a new relationship: the symbiotic bond between social media and traditional broadcasting. Traditional media was often circulated on social media. Conversely, images, videos and information found on social media provided material for traditional media. While some Arab countries have come to rely on Twitter or Facebook more than others, all the Arab states continue to see high levels of television program consumption.

The 2011 revolution in Egypt is evidence that these statistics and trends are significant. They indicate a new medium by which societal growth can occur—innovation, citizenship, and mobilization are accessible in the digital world despite repressive autocratic regimes at the helm of state leadership. As more news sources emerge in television and satellite broadcasting, and more Egyptian youth turn to the Internet for news, literature, and information, the dictatorial system that has nurtured years of obedience and subjugation to the state will continue to decline. It is worth adding that the 2011 revolution for many young Egyptians was their encounter with organic, grassroots political action. This is important because the experience has shaped youth perception of how political change can be implemented—on the ground and online. Additionally, from a statistic-based theoretical perspective, the large and expanding population of Egyptian youth combined with a poverty rate of 20 percent indicates a higher probability of domestic armed conflict, riots, and demonstrations. Under these circumstances, plus the emerging virtual means to mobilize vis-à-vis Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other media, the landscape in Egypt seems ripe for political activity. With this scene as a backdrop, we can now explore and better understand the work of Bassem Youssef, whose fame relied heavily on satellite broadcasting, the Internet, and a young, politically-minded audience.

The Cardiothoracic Comic

"Criticism comes with being in power... They need to understand that the country and the people are bigger than the immediate followers in their group." – Bassem Youssef

Bassem Youssef’s career embodies the powerful intersection of political satire and the advancement of technology and media. He illustrates the potential role late-night show hosts and satirists can play in Egyptian political discourse, mobilization, and eventual emergence of political plurality. Before he was in show business, Bassem Youssef was a renowned

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25 Ibid.
26 Linda Herrera with Rehab Sakr, ed., Wired Citizenship: Youth Learning and Activism in the Middle East (New York: Routledge, 2014), 63-64.
cardiothoracic surgeon. He operated at Cairo University’s Faculty of Medicine, received a US medical license in 2007, acquired additional training in Germany, and eventually wound up treating the wounded at Tahrir Square in 2011 in the heart of the Egyptian Revolution.

Youssef was witness to slanted state media coverage of the pro-democracy revolts in Tahrir Square. According to Youssef, the media tried to convince its audience that the protestors were not there out of frustration, and this attempt to skew the truth spurred Youssef into action. Inspired by Jon Stewart’s commentary on U.S. news coverage of the Egyptian Revolution, Youssef began airing his B+ Show on YouTube immediately following the ousting of Mubarak. Each episode was roughly five minutes in length and had a basic set—a simple chair at a plain desk with collages of pictures in the background. The series was a success, and was viewed a million times in the first week. Millions of views later, Youssef’s web series transitioned to ONtv (and later to Coptic Broadcasting Center [CBC]), an Egyptian satellite broadcasting company, and Youssef changed the name of his show to Albernameg (The Show).

Aside from his global accolades, which included an invitation to Jon Stewart’s Daily Show and the International Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalists, there are two notable achievements in Bassem Youssef’s career: 1) his standoff with the Morsi government, and 2) his open criticism of the Sisi government. As with most satirists, Youssef’s primary target for ridicule in Albernameg’s second season was the government, specifically Mohamed Morsi, the new president of Egypt and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. He often attacked statements Morsi made, highlighting hypocrisies and inconsistencies between Morsi’s words and actions.

Satire and Political Extremism

“For Egypt’s public prosecutor, recently appointed by Mr. Morsi over furious objections from his peers, has ordered a probe into a television satirist, Bassem Youssef, whom Islamist litigators accuse of insulting the president. His crime? Using as a prop a red, heart-shaped pillow with Mr. Morsi’s face pictured on it.”—The Economist

When Morsi pushed his Islamist-penned constitution through a referendum in government, riots broke out around Egypt, and Bassem Youssef took to the offensive in the war of words, criticizing the government and supporting the protestors. After an initial wave of flak thrown at him by religious TV personalities, eventually even the mainstream media came around

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
to support Youssef’s stance. All of this led to Morsi appointing Egypt’s public prosecutor to investigate and probe Bassem Youssef, whom Islamist litigators accused of insulting Islam and the president on Albernameg. The probe ended up very publicly highlighting the fact that the 2011 Revolution simply replaced Hosni Mubarak with another conniving and self-interested politician. Consequently, the international publicity Youssef received put Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in the spotlight and made the entire affair one big joke—the chief prosecutor was acting on far-fetched complaints, including some in which people claimed to be psychologically affected by Youssef’s mocking of Morsi. 36 These asinine complaints were clearly investigated in the interest of keeping the Islamist president’s aura of sanctity. 37

In a world saturated with media coverage and sensationalized headlines, Youssef’s case received international attention, harnessed his position as a public figure and effectively mobilized media worldwide to condemn the Morsi regime, including Jon Stewart himself. In fact, Jon Stewart’s 10-minute clip in which he berates Morsi for his arrest of Youssef became the center of a spat between the U.S. embassy in Cairo and the Egyptian government on Twitter. 38 All the while, Egypt’s declining human rights record and media censorship was under a microscope, placing pressure on the Morsi regime to act.

The mere fact that the Morsi government entertained flimsy complaints against Bassem Youssef indicated the new regime would not bring about the change many young Egyptians had hoped. While there are no empirical studies that indicate his show helped in the eventual ousting of Morsi, it seems oddly coincidental that Albernameg’s season finale occurred days before the toppling of Morsi’s government. The wide viewership of Youssef’s show and the publicity of this case made the legal probe of Youssef a globalized issue, tarnished the Egyptian government’s legitimacy worldwide and again highlighted the important relationship of media, the Internet, and political action. By the end of 2013, Bassem Youssef was the region’s top trending person online, 39 his show was the most searched show on Google and the top trending Arabic talk show on YouTube. 40 Furthermore, he had accumulated over 2 million followers on Facebook. 41 The numbers have increased since then. Without the Internet, Youssef would never have risen so quickly in popularity—if at all—amongst young Egyptians, and without access to non-government media, the populace may have remained docile in the face of yet more repression by its government.

Youssef’s second great accomplishment came just months after Abdel al-Sisi’s military coup against Morsi’s Islamist government. Despite many Egyptians’ excitement with this

41 Ibid.
development, Bassem Youssef still found plenty of reasons to criticize Sisi and the military in the first episode of Albernameg’s third season. Unfortunately for Youssef, his broadcasting company felt that criticizing a military government was dangerous, particularly in a political climate ridden with polarized rhetoric and toxic nationalistic fervor. CBC terminated its contract with Youssef one week after the episode aired, forcing him to seek a new sponsor for his show and placing the show on hiatus until MBC MASR agreed to broadcast his material in February 2014.

Upon his return, Youssef went back to censuring the military interim government and broadcasted that he personally opposed Sisi running for President in the upcoming elections. He followed this statement with criticism of the other presidential candidates, again primarily focusing on the hypocrisies committed by these politicians. As expected, this raised a firestorm of opposition, and by June of 2014, Youssef left the show for good, citing “harassment” from authorities and pro-Sisi supporters as a main cause. "There is no tolerance from the Muslim Brotherhood side or those who call themselves liberal. Everyone is looking for a pharaoh that suits him," Youssef wrote in a 2013 op-ed piece. This statement is echoed by both Morsi and Sisi’s treatment of the comedian and illustrates the highly politicized and polarized state of affairs in Egypt.

Analysis

"[Bassem Youssef’s rhetoric] encourages people to question figures of authority and to think critically, and realise that as citizens they have the right to evaluate what [leaders] are doing." – Rasha Abdulla, Professor of Journalism at the American University in Cairo

What makes Albernameg (and other shows like The Daily Show) unique is its synthesis of humor—political satire specifically—and political knowledge. Humor has many uses and effects. It can help release pent up energy and resolve cognitive incongruities. It can make an audience more receptive to persuasion, and it can also be used to challenge authority with minimal repercussions—like the king’s jester, the comic always has the excuse: “I was

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48 Ibid.
only joking.” The longstanding tradition of humor has been employed consistently throughout modern history, making it a comfortable medium through which political ideas can circulate.

With humor as a vessel for communicating news, *Albernameg* is unlike traditional or state-sponsored news sources, where viewers tune in to be directly informed of current events. Inherent in the structure of the show, viewers must come to *Albernameg* with some outside knowledge to understand the jokes being made regarding political incumbents, presidential candidates, and state policies. This also distinguishes Bassem Youssef and Jon Stewart from late-night show hosts like David Letterman and Jay Leno—the latter two focus their jokes on superficial aspects of politics (i.e. the appearance of incumbents, their characteristics and traits), rather than substantive issues (i.e. their policies, track records, etc.), and, therefore, their viewers require little outside knowledge or critical examination. Bassem Youssef depends on a young, well-read audience to connect the dots. If 74 percent of young Egyptians are using the Internet as a means to stay current on news, *Albernameg*’s audience is perfect for its brand of political satire—they are steeped in information and have instantaneous access to it when they need, be it Google, news websites, articles, Facebook and Twitter, or blogs.

Research conducted on Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, and Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*, indicates that viewing late-night political comedy shows has a positive relationship with viewers’ political efficacy. Their self-perceived competence in political affairs led to higher percentages of political participation. Further research by Amy Bree Becker indicated that young people who watch political interviews on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* versus on a cable news program like *MSNBC* or *FOX News* are more likely to take part in a protest, march or demonstrate, sign an email petition, or sign a written petition about political or social issues. Moreover, they are also more likely to recall basic facts about the politician if they catch them on comedy as opposed to cable news. Studies also suggest that traditional U.S. news sources, like satirical news, positively affect political efficacy. In Egypt, where there is a growing distrust of state-run media and traditional news outlets, we can extrapolate meaningful implications based on these findings.

In democratic societies like the U.S. where freedom of speech is enforced, it is unsurprising that traditional news sources, though partisan, were also found to promote political efficacy. A similar study, however, would likely produce different results. If the Egyptian media instilled political efficacy, it would probably do so less effectively than in the U.S. due to its unbalanced enforcement of freedom of speech and the government’s intolerance in terms of

52 Ibid.
53 Amy Bree Becker, “Political satire makes young people more likely to participate in politics. Trevor Noah’s The Daily Show is likely to continue that trend,” *London School of Economics: USCentre* (3 April 2015), retrieved from http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2015/04/03/political-satire-makes-young-people-more-likely-to-participate-in-politics-trevor-noahs-the-daily-show-is-likely-to-continue-that-trend/ on 4 December 2015.
54 Ibid.
tainting its public image. This lack of political and ideological plurality would give Egyptian citizens a narrower sense of what is possible, and thus would detract from their self-confidence to participate in the political system. If this logic is true, then a show like Bassem Youssef’s is a large leap from the norm in Egypt.

Youssef encourages critical thinking and making well-informed conclusions. Like Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and John Oliver, Youssef often criticizes news coverage itself. The criticism of the news media sends subliminal messages to viewers that encourage questioning the establishment, and simultaneously widens the scope of viewers’ analyses of current events. This is a departure from the historical and cultural trends of obedience and submission to authority. Youssef’s news format coupled with the multitude of emerging online news sources that allow viewers to be well informed holds great potential as a political tool in Egyptian society to counter the government narratives that continue to be transmitted on traditional news.

A timely example of the Egyptian traditional news propagating the government narrative happened in November 2015. The Sisi government tried to pin the crash of a Russian charter jet in the Sinai Peninsula on the Western powers—the U.S. and U.K. particularly—despite Daesh’s claim of responsibility. The misdirection of blame is speculated to be an attempt to create an image of order and state control. The “ruse” story form and other master narratives were used to distract the public from real problems that affect Egyptians (rise in terror, declining economy, etc.). These extremist narratives typically redirect blame toward archetypal culprits: Israel, the U.S., Europe, etc. Past regimes and the current government utilize media as a means of pushing the government narrative and maintaining a culture of obedience in which the state and its leaders are infallible. With a rise in technology-dependent youth, however, the government’s ability to convince the public is diminishing.

Social media, satellite broadcast television, and the virtual space in general adds another powerful element to the equation: the internationalization of domestic political issues. The Internet opens a new globally interconnected frontier of virtual media, making it increasingly more difficult for countries like Egypt to control and limit the dissemination of information. Bassem Youssef’s legal case with the Morsi regime is a case in point.

Certainly, Youssef’s fame in Egypt made his case high profile right from the beginning, but the means used to spread the word depended heavily on social media and the Internet—without the Internet, Youssef may have slipped from the public’s view as the case dragged on. Facebook and Twitter were highly active during the time of his arrest, and his YouTube channel allowed citizens of Egypt to access the content of his show, which was the center of scrutiny. Morsi attempted to distance himself from the prosecutor and the complaints thrown at Youssef,

57 Ibid.
claiming he supported freedom of speech. However, access to the video clips gave the country (and the world) a chance to make a judgment on its own. Regardless of Morsi’s claims, this case raised suspicion and exacerbated the already growing distrust for the government amongst Egyptians.

This case shows the power of virtual space as an operational arena in which wired citizens can: 1) counter government narratives and 2) remain visible to the digital public (i.e. other “wired citizens”). Youssef was much safer criticizing the government on a satirical program today than he would have been 30 years ago. Before the Internet, smartphones and televised news, the government could simply arrest dissenters and make them disappear with far more ease. As media technology continues to advance and proliferate and young people shift towards “wired citizenship,” governments seeking to control their populations will face increasing difficulty.

In addition to the publicity of his case, humor itself also allowed for Youssef to stay out of jail and remain on the air. It is worth entertaining the idea that if Youssef criticized Morsi at a political protest or condemned the Islamist government for its hypocrisies in a serious book, the likelihood of his arrest and the follow-up on the charges placed against him would have been higher. Humor, because of its cultural entrenchment in Egyptian society, is difficult for the Egyptian government to condemn or spin as a foreign conspiracy. It is a double-edged sword for authoritarian governments—shutting down a satirical TV show could make the government appear weak or emotionally sensitive, and allowing the TV show to continue also jeopardizes the government’s prestige by opening itself to public criticism. Again, the jester’s “I was only joking” makes humor an effective “weapon of the weak.”

Allowing Bassem Youssef to keep his show on the air may not have been causally related to the ousting of, but was certainly detrimental to, the Morsi government. Nevertheless, it was positive for the Egyptian public. Youssef’s witty takedowns of government officials forced the Morsi government to publicly and directly confront the counter narratives being put forth on Albernameg. The widespread instant access to news coverage and various media commentary on the legal case against Youssef created an environment in which the Egyptian government was ill equipped to respond. Proof of Morsi’s implementation of an Islamist agenda was accessible to anyone in Egypt with a smartphone or spare time to go to an Internet café, and no spin of the truth could dupe the Egyptian public. Forcing the government to confront Youssef in the open diminished the government’s prestige and legitimacy, creating a space in civil society to air discontent and challenge the system.

Although Sisi replaced an Islamist government with a military one, it was the mobilization of civil society that made this transfer of power feasible. Youssef, in his first few episodes of season three of Albernameg, was able to question the military coup, and call out Sisi

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60 Linda Herrera with Rehab Sakr, ed., Wired Citizenship: Youth Learning and Activism in the Middle East (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.
supporters for hyper-glorifying him. The subsequent suspension of his show reintroduced the double-edged sword of humor—Sisi’s silencing of dissident media carried implications about the character of the government, and thus put it in the public eye for judgment. Despite the fact that Sisi has maintained control of the government since 2013, the precedent set by Youssef in the face of a looming government leaves open the possibility for its replication in the future. It was a mistake for Sisi to strip Egyptian society of Bassem Youssef and his brand of humor. The free flow of jokes and comedy, according to Sigmund Freud, allows for pent-up emotion and aggression to be released and is a non-violent channel for challenging injustice. Removing non-violent means of protest leaves few attractive options, and despite the government’s logic, probably makes Sisi more vulnerable to overt political activity and intensified opposition.

Conclusion

Access to information often correlates with (and perhaps causes) political activism and pluralism. Countries, past and present, that have tightly controlled media show a trend in the opposite direction. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and North Korea monitored media for dissent, squashed opposition, and instilled a climate of fear and repression, which, by and large, manifested in the public’s obedience and submission to authority. It is not coincidental that dictatorships attempt to censor opposition and project an image of supremacy. The power of knowledge, information, and critical thought are dangerous to autocratic regimes, and they are fully aware of this fact.

The palatable medium of humor makes political satire a potentially useful and powerful tool in Egypt. The idea that satire can impact politics is not theoretical, nor is it limited to the few examples of Bassem Youssef. John Oliver produced a 13-minute piece covering net-neutrality on HBO’s Last Week Tonight, and following his show, viewers flooded the Federal Communication Commission’s website, causing it to crash. The German version of The Daily Show, The Heute Show, aired a segment that resulted in the firing of a German lobbyist. Political satire in a democratic country often provides critique that promotes change within the system. Youssef’s show was criticizing much of the system itself, and it is here that he differs from The Daily Show, The Heute Show, and Last Week Tonight. While many of the mechanisms needed for peaceful change and political activism are in place in the U.S., Egypt is still in the midst of reforming its political processes and mechanisms, and thus the impetus for change falls more heavily on the people themselves. This is what explains Sisi’s ability to replace an Islamist regime with a military one. People were able to mobilize, but there still is not widespread

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64 Ibid.
65 Amy Bree Becker, “Political satire makes young people more likely to participate in politics. Trevor Noah’s The Daily Show is likely to continue that trend,” London School of Economics: USCentre (3 April 2015), retrieved from http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2015/04/03/political-satire-makes-young-people-more-likely-to-participate-in-politics-trevor-noahs-the-daily-show-is-likely-to-continue-that-trend/ on 4 December 2015.
67 Ibid. Pgs. 11-12.
consensus on the best way to govern post-revolution. The Egyptian people are still exploring their identity and where they fit in the world.

In an article for *Nieman Reports*, Youssef wrote, “For me, satire should be directed at the two biggest authorities: the people in power and the people in media. There is absolutely no courage or chivalry in mocking people who cannot answer back. As poetic as it is to think that satire can topple governments and change regimes, it can’t do this. All it does is bring more people to the table.” The intersection of the trends discussed in this analysis paper should be investigated further by Egyptian activists dedicated to promoting the causes of democratization and political plurality in Egypt. Political satire and modern media can create the space for action, but as Bassem Youssef said himself, “Whether change happens is up to the people, not the satirists.”

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68 Bassem Youssef, “The Joke is Mightier Than The Sword: The enduring role of satire in free—and not so free—societies,” *Nieman Reports* (Winter 2015), 37.
69 Ibid.