Laughing Through Change:
Subversive Humor in Online Videos of Arab Youth

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Arab youth seek ways to subvert authority and redefine identity in the somewhat less supervised spaces of online humor. As Arab states tighten their grip on youth for fear of dissent, their youth are exploring other means for social change at the murky boundaries between jokes and insults, seriousness and frivolity. This study argues that the interplay between parental and political authorities complicates their attempts at political change and demands an analysis of resistance at both the cultural and political levels. With a focus on Egypt and Jordan, this study uses a qualitative thematic analysis of satirical online videos to examine instances of disguised dissent and consciousness-raising among youth away from closed-off public spaces.

Keywords: political humor, jokes, subversion, videos, Egypt, Jordan, Arab Spring

Five years after the Tahrir Square uprising in 2011, Shady Hussein, a young Egyptian activist and correspondent for a light comedy TV show, independently recorded a YouTube video in which he distributed balloons made out of condoms to Egyptian police occupying Tahrir Square on January 25, 2016. He was later widely criticized and threatened for "disrespecting" and "tricking" the police into believing he was a supporter celebrating their day with balloons. Shady's video, nonetheless, was a reflection of a widely felt disappointment that five years later and following countless victims, this day is still celebrated as the "Day of the Police." He expressed this in an interview:

> January 25th should be the day of the revolution, the Egyptian police pages are filled with threats such as "let them go down, we'll show them." . . . Okay we are not going to protest, and we will not chant, for with one bullet they can take us out, but we will stay here to laugh at you and ridicule you. (Mahdi, 2016, para. 4)

Shady's comment signaled a general disenchantment with traditional politics and a growing interest among Egyptian and Arab youth living under dictatorships in "new forums and new forms" of expression to sustain the momentum of their movements (Windt, 1972, p. 11).

To many Egyptian and Arab youth, the temporary taste of freedom offered by the uprisings was difficult to forgo, and subverting authority has become the hallmark of a generation born amid uprisings. This proved difficult to maintain with new, even more repressive regimes resorting to nationalist polarizing

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Date submitted: 2015–09–29

discourse or state-sanctioned violence. Arab youth's struggle against authority is further complicated by the long-standing cultural tradition of respect for the authority of parents, teachers, and, more generally, political leaders. Hence, in their struggle for voice and a distinct youthful identity, they are not only challenging political powers but deconstructing social myths upon which these powers rest, where political criticism works to unsettle both political and cultural taboos. This dialectic between the cultural and political realms demands a wider understanding of politics, where it is not only representational but cultural—a "domain in which meanings are constructed and negotiated, where relations of dominance and subordination are defined and contested" (Jackson, 1991, p. 200).

As traditional means of expression are stunted, Arab youth look for creative ways to express their opinions and subvert parental and political authorities. They resort to online spaces—relatively unconquered by parents and political authorities—to challenge authority and carve out new identities while utilizing techniques borrowed from comedy and entertainment to disguise elements of challenge in their discourse. For many, this means turning to the ostensibly benign and ambiguous world of humor.

Satire and Censorship in Arab Countries

While many Arab countries experienced the ripples of the Arab Spring, this study focuses on instance of political satire in Egypt and Jordan as two major Arab countries that experienced the Arab Spring in different ways. They are also two of the most active producers of satirical online videos (Naar, 2014). In Egypt, political humor was not something new; it has existed throughout its modern and premodern histories. Poets and songwriters such as Bayram El-Tunsi and Sayed Darwish composed satirical ballads critical of the British occupation and the Egyptian monarchy. In Jordan, the well-known poet 'Arar wrote satirical poems criticizing Jordanian society (Al-Sijill, 2009). While Egyptian political satire took on various shapes from print to songs and performance, Jordanian satire remained concentrated in satirical columns and cartoons (Al-Sijill, 2009). However, even the tempered freedom of expression prior to the 1940s began to shrivel under nationalist claims that rising Arab nations cannot withstand satire. Criticism of political leaders was not tolerated in Egypt and Jordan. Since the 2011 uprisings, the accorded sanctity of Egyptian and Arab leaders has been challenged. This was followed by a surge in caricature depictions on protest signs of Ben-Ali, Mubarak, Assad, and Saleh.

On the other hand, comedic productions that took aim at cultural traditions were much more tolerated by authorities. Egyptian plays such as *Madraset Al-Mushaghbeen* (School of the mischievous) and *El-'Iyal Kebret* (Kids have grown) were not only local sensations but widely watched across the Arab world. The Egyptian dialect understood by most Arabs encouraged Arab countries to acquire a lot of their TV programs from Egypt (Tutton, 2011). Those two plays not only highlight an intergenerational dilemma but signal a departure from a culture of reverence and respectful language to a culture of rebelliousness against an older venerated generation in the figures of teachers and parents (Salem, 2014). Though written and directed in the 1970s and early 1980s, they remain popular among youth who continually reference them in their jokes, memes, and daily conversations. In Egypt and much of the Arab-speaking world, reverence for the elderly is not only a cultural norm but one embedded in Islamic traditions; it becomes problematic, however, when conflated with political authority (which happens to be elderly as

well). Hence, more often than not, political opposition is equated with lack of respect for the elderly—or, more precisely—authority figures.

While Freedom House (2015a) ranked Egypt's Internet freedom as "partly free" in 2014, this changed to "not free" in 2015, when crackdowns on online activists led to prison sentences and, in more severe cases, life imprisonment. At the same time, though Freedom House (2015b) ranked Jordan as "partly free" with regard to the Internet, this freedom took a plunge in 2014–2015, when Jordan started cracking down on activists for their social media posts and closed news websites for not obtaining a license. Regional influences on political rights, especially following the Arab Spring uprisings, were notable; according to Helfont and Helfont (2012), "after flooding Jordan with economic aid, Saudi Arabia now hopes that Jordan will not only accept formal membership in the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council], but will also adopt the GCC model of limited political rights in exchange for economic stability" (p. 84).

Though satire may constitute a means for safe disrespect in the above contexts, it runs the risk of overstepping its boundaries when open political criticism is involved. The assassination of Naji al-Ali in London, the beating of Syrian Ali Farzat (Freedman, 2012), the persecution of Egyptian Bassem Youssef in March 2013, and the censorship of his show *Albernameg* in October 2013 (Abdulla, 2014) reveals the extent of the threat authorities sometimes see in satire and how their response can be detrimental in authoritarian contexts.

Authority, Identity, and Cultural Resistance

The interplay between authority (in its many forms) and identity should not be examined in isolation of Foucault's (1977) concepts of "regimes of truth" and "technologies of power." To Foucault, political power extends far beyond centralized legitimated authority to various institutional settings that "cut across the distinctions between the political and the social, and the public and the private" (Dyrberg, 1997 p. 89). Rather than focusing on figures of authority, Foucault interrogates the conditions of possibility for authority whereby roles of power and subjectivity are determined. Foucault notes "how authority comes to constitute, inscribe and invest itself in the different ways we produce true and false statements about who we are and what we should become" (Dean, 1996). This ubiquity of power is also germane to Lakoff and Johnson's (2003, p. 3) concept of unconscious metaphors: "Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."

Consequently, according to Lakoff (2008), political reasoning is largely influenced by unconscious metaphors such as the nation-as-family. This metaphor, he argues, presumes two idealized versions of the family that correspond to two idealized versions of the nation: the strict father model that maps onto pure conservative politics and the nurturant parent model that maps onto pure progressive politics. In the strict father model, the father supports, protects, and lays out the moral code for what is right and what is wrong, while children must be obedient or suffer retribution (Lakoff, 2008). Although how we think about politics and how we think about families and gender roles are historically and culturally specific, political systems, including opposition parties, in Egypt and much of the Arab-speaking world tend to fall into the strict father model.

Following the January 25, 2011, protests, Ahmed Shafiq, the then-prime minister, likened the Egyptian president to the father of the people, suggesting that it is not appropriate to demand his departure "that way." Egyptian and Arab nationalist authority figures, such as Mubarak, managed to appeal to the masses for more than half a century by first drawing on notions of nationalism, and later—as they themselves aged—by drawing on traditional notions of respect for the elderly. Like Weber's authority of the "eternal yesterday," the aged were granted "the right to prescribe behavior for others in practically all behavior areas" (French & Raven, 1959, p. 265), while dissent was crippled by the social taboo of "disrespect."

As political conflict starts to seep into the social fabric of society, political loyalties reorganize networks of friends and families. However, as Hugh Duncan (1985/2002) notes, "the conflict between family, school, state, church and art does not resolve itself in the individual by some kinds of social mechanics. It is a dramatic struggle" (p. 310). The ubiquity of power in Foucault's regimes of truth or Lakoff's metaphors hints at the role of culture in the formation of primary or complex metaphors, social myths, or regimes of truth as well as the need for an analysis of resistance at the level of our everyday life: a "technology and practice of resistance analogous to Michel Foucault's analysis of the technology of domination" (Scott, 1990, p. 20). This is what James Scott (1990) describes as the study of "infrapolitics"—in contrast to "the open, declared forms of resistance, which attract most attention," it is "disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance" (p. 198). To miss it, Scott argues, "is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes" (p. 199).

One form of Scott's "disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance" is Duncan's (1985/2002) "sanctioned disrespect," or comedy. In comedy, he argues, "we uncover the ambiguities and contradictions that beset us as we seek to act together" (p. xlix). However, joke perception—and, subsequently, its pleasure—notes Mary Douglas (1968), are based on congruence between the joke structure and the social structure. Hence, satirists have to build their jokes on grounds of nonthreatening familiar situations. Through congruence with the social, comedians not only identify with their audience but assert their control of the social situation in their ability to articulate that which is "widely felt" but "rarely said" (Jenkins, 2007, para. 5).

However, this congruence serves only as a disguise and an entry point to the much more complex and subversive functions of humor through "its ruses, its fragmentation, its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quite activity, in short its quasi-invisibility" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 32). By poaching on social situations, jokers "constantly [manipulate] events in order to turn them into 'opportunities'" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). Hence, jokes are "dependent on time, the moment of action" (Castello, 2010, p. 72), while jokers, like workers practicing la Perruque, divert time from the social situations, using scraps from the social context to "cunningly" create "gratuitous products," jokes, to signify their ability to control the situation (de Certeau, 1984, p. 3).

Jokes can be particularly valuable at times of social transformation, which are also times of social conflict and disintegration. In her discussion of political humor in the Arab Spring, Allagui (2014) notes that "critical humor makes sense of serious and significant political problems while at the same time

entertaining the audience" (p. 988). Opdycke (2013) also notes how use of the comic frame by satirists such as Bassem Youssef allowed the audience to reflect on several perspectives. By existing at the social boundary point between organization and control on one hand and vitality and relaxed control of consciousness on the other (Douglas, 1968), jokes serve a double function: They confront eroding old structures with emerging cultural forms, imparting an "expressive form on an emergent perspective within a culture" (Jenkins, 2007, para. 5); however, they do so in the safety of humor, where jokers can always claim to be simply passing a joke (Scott, 1990). Gordon and Arafa (2014) note how Youssef drew on Egyptians' nostalgia for Nasser's patriotic songs (Wataniyat) to criticize and mock Morsi. Humor can also foster a sense of identity among group members; Terrion and Ashforth (2002) note how put-down humor "helps foster group identity and cohesion in a temporary group" (p. 55).

Amid the growing polarization characterizing post–Arab Spring politics and social life, we ask how Egyptian and Jordanian youth use humor to subvert, control, or consolidate authority in both its cultural and political forms. Furthermore, with the ongoing destabilizing cultural and political conflict, how do these videos work to define their identity as it relates to their parents and national boundaries?

Method

This study analyzes a large selection of online YouTube videos produced by nonmainstream Egyptian and Jordanian youth in the period from 2011 to 2014. While countries such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen fell into violent manifestations of civil strife, both Egypt and Jordan arguably had some room for the expression of various intensities of political and social criticisms, especially online. The criteria of selection is the vloggers' age group (18–35), and their humorous semiprofessional content. The nonmainstream content is important for considering what is at stake for these young video producers and hence their need for artistic performance to disguise elements of dissent. Individual videos are selected based on whether their titles or descriptions reference a form of authority, identity, or cultural practice. This selection does not deliberately consider political content as a criterion (though some of the videos are openly political) due to this study's wider conception of politics as outlined earlier. The data set includes 58 videos from the YouTube channels of two vloggers/satirists from Egypt—*Joe Tube* (18 videos, from seasons 1 and 2, 8–10 minutes each) and *Albernameg* (15 videos, from seasons 1, 2, and 3, 30–45 minutes each), and a YouTube channel from Jordan by Kharabeesh, *N2OComedy* (25 videos, 3–8 minutes each) featuring various amateur and semiprofessional comedians. The choice of these channels is based on their ranking as some of the most subscribed to and most viewed video channels in Egypt and Jordan. In a recent infographic of Arab YouTube viewership by Startappz, Kharabeesh, the producer of *N2OComedy*, ranked second in viewership in the Arab world (Boshers, 2013; Farhat, 2014), while *Albernameg* and *Joe Tube* ranked second and third in most subscribed YouTube channels in Egypt (VidStatsX, 2016). Whereas most of these reports rely on different criteria for determining the popularity of these shows and are categorized by either country or genre but sometimes not both, *Joe Tube*, *Albernameg*, and *N2OComedy* consistently show in the lists of top viewed or subscribed YouTube channels locally and across the Arab-speaking world (Boshers, 2013; Gamaleldin 2016).

Youssef Hussein, an online satirist and supporter of Morsi, dedicated his online show *Joe Tube* to criticizing the military while breaking down its myth of impeccability. Relying on simple resources, Hussein

set up his camera to record videos in his Nasr City apartment. *Joe Tube* now has more than 1.6 million subscribers to its YouTube channel, and over 150 million views (Gamaleldin, 2016). Likewise, Bassem Youssef, a medical surgeon-turned-comedian from Egypt, started with an online show, *B+*, for satirical political commentary. It, too, was recorded at his Ma'adi apartment with the help of his friends. Later, Youssef's show turned mainstream following the ouster of Mubarak, and it became highly popular among youth.

Kharabeesh (scratches), an online youth-led Jordanian start-up launched in 2008, has several YouTube channels that feature rising satirists and stand-up comedians in individual or group comedy sketches (Awad, 2012). Its online show, *N2OComedy: Tahshish Kanony* (Legal toking), tackles topics ranging from parent–child relations, peer relations, relationships between sexes, education, psychology, and social habits to the effect of wider government policies on their future. The program started with amateur equipment, yet became one of the most widely watched YouTube channels in the region. *N2OComedy* has more than 550,000 subscribers and more than 96 million views (Gamaleldin, 2016).

It is important to note that these satirists vary in their levels of professionality and political dissent. While one of them, Bassem Youssef, is now 42, which is older than the set age criteria, he was 36 when he started; it also important to examine his early contributions as one of the pioneers of online political satire in post–Arab Spring Egypt, not to mention his target audience, which is predominantly young (Durham, 2014). While the comedians examined may self-identify differently—as either regular vloggers, activists, or stand-up comedians—they all share aspects of being nonmainstream self-starters who use humor to introduce challenge in their online shows.

This study employs theoretical thematic analysis, where concepts from literature inform the coding and identification of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in a reflexive process that allows the introduction of new themes informed by the data (Saldana, 2009). In the first cycle of coding, instances of humor (e.g., conversational or situational jokes) (Sen, 2012) were extracted as the unit of analysis from the script of online satirical videos (transcribed in Arabic and translated to English). They were initially coded using process coding as detailed by Saldana (2009), where the guiding principle in assigning codes was the function of humor (e.g., subverting or controlling). In the second cycle of coding, data are analyzed for similarities and differences to identify subthemes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In identifying the themes and the subthemes, "the 'keyness' of a theme [was] not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures—but rather on whether it [captured] something important in relation to the overall research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

Findings and Analysis

Context for Analysis

Political leadership in many Arab-speaking countries is legitimated through a complex of long-standing power relations that include the military, state media, and progovernment religious authority. Myths of leaders' impeccability, military efficiency, and state media credibility work variably to embed these power relations into citizens' imagination of social order. In Egypt, following the 1952 military-led

revolution, in which the monarchy subservient to Britain was overthrown, the Egyptian military was upheld as the people's ally. To this day, this myth continues to dominate discourse regarding the political legitimacy of military rule. Recently, in what was perceived as a favorable move, the Egyptian army decided not to side with Mubarak during the 18 days of the Tahrir sit-in. Since then, it has been common to hear the slogan, "The military, the people . . . are one hand" chanted in Tahrir Square (Ketchley, 2014, p. 155).

Political authorities across the Arab world manage to perpetuate their myths via different platforms, from informal allusions in popular culture to the more formal religious Friday sermons and educational curricula. In Egypt, for instance, it has often been reiterated falsely in media and popular culture that Prophet Muhammed said "Egyptian soldiers are earth's best soldiers" (Mandour, 2013, para. 7). In monarchies such as Jordan and Saudi, discourses of ruler obedience are often invoked to legitimize their rule (Affan, 2014). This conflation between political and religious discourses often places average Arab citizens at odds with criticizing authority on the basis of corruption or incompetence.

The visibility of the political role of the Egyptian army was substantially revealed during the 2011 uprising, Jordan, on the other hand, argues Helfont and Helfont (2011), became "a key battleground between those who would like to see a more democratic region, and those who would like to maintain economic stability" (p. 82). Hence, though Jordan experienced the ripples of the Arab uprisings through a succession of protests, it did not reach the point of overthrowing the well-established monarchy along with its network of power. Confrontations remained confined to clashes with police. Additionally, the makeup of Jordan of both East Bankers (those with historical roots on the East Bank of the Jordan River) and the West Bankers (Jordanians of Palestinian descent) largely put questions of national identity and Palestine at the heart of many of the political and social debates.

Subverting Authority

Following the violent crackdowns on protesters in both Egypt and Jordan (with variable outcomes), many acts of resistance were reformulated by youth to target the underlying myths rather than just protesting the actions of authorities. A common theme of subversion runs through the videos examined. Yet subversion manifests itself with various political and social intensities depending on the context. While Egyptian videos were more intense with political criticism that occasionally flowed to the social realm, Jordanian videos, probably influenced by the less intense local context, mostly invoked the political through the social. The target of subversion in Jordan was more diffuse yet more in conversation with the larger themes of Arab nationalism and globalization.

Subverting Political Authority

Subverting the Leader

The Arab Spring uprisings saw the first public subversion of a leader's figure, starting with Ben-Ali and followed by Mubarak. Mubarak pictures were taken down from public squares in euphoric celebrations, and protest signs parodied him as the devil, Hitler, and a laughing cow. It comes as no surprise, with

Mubarak described as the father of the people, that the protests were barraged by mainstream media accusations on grounds of disrespect—a moral weapon for silencing political opposition. However, this unequivocal support for the leader by state-loyal media changed with the election of Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, who arguably was not viewed as a regime insider (Bradley, 2014).

Prior to Morsi's ouster by the military, state-loyal media systematically attacked him on grounds of incompetence. Lamis El-Hadidy, a prominent TV host known for her support of the Mubarak regime, called Morsi, "Loser . . . Loser . . . Loser" (MediaMasrTv14, 2013). Abdul-Fattah El-Sisi, on the other hand, was often portrayed as the military rescuer from instability. As a military general, Sisi drew legitimacy from the myth of military efficiency and organization, which were both lacking in postrevolution Egypt. Morsi's supporters, however, were first to take aim at Sisi, exposing what they viewed as the hypocrisy of state-loyal media in magnifying Morsi's failures while downplaying Sisi's. "Morsi was not supported by the military, state security, Justice Department, nor the media, so he failed; there were reasons for his failure. The question is, how could [Sisi] with all these resources fail?" exclaimed Youssef Hussein. Hussein was not only challenging Sisi's presumed competency but alluding to Sisi's complex network of power, which was masked by an ostensible separation of authorities. The segment concluded with a movie scene featuring Sisi's face superimposed on a character being called "Loser . . . Loser . . . Loser" (Joe Tube, 2014f). Bassem Youssef poked fun at Morsi's overuse of his index finger in threatening his enemies by altering his speech video to have it shoot out laser beams instead (Albernameg, 2013).

Other subversions relied on developing an incongruity between the person's comments and his actions (Apte, 1985). Hussein used incongruity to challenge state media attempts to portray Sisi as a world-renowned leader. Commenting on Sisi's visit to the United States and his speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2014, Hussein noted how he was not formally received by President Obama or any other U.S. official, as claimed by some media outlets, but was rather received by the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs (Joe Tube, 2014d). Photoshopping a wooden nose over Sisi's face (which kept elongating every time he supposedly told a lie), Hussein remixed parts of Sisi's speech to the UN with his local Egyptian speeches to show the discrepancy between the two discourses. While one spoke of human rights and justice, the other prioritized state sovereignty over human rights and dignity. Hussein contrasted Sisi's proclamation to the UN that Egypt is "a civil democratic state" with a local Egyptian news segment detailing nationwide governor appointments all filled by military officials. Less direct, the N2O team relied on incongruity to expose the hypocrisy of appointed parliamentary members, using parodies instead of actual segments to juxtapose the members' promises of prosperity and fighting corruption with their documented actions of cronyism and fraud (N2OComedy, 2013b).

Subverting the Military and State Apparatuses

Egyptian youth criticisms of the military ranged from questioning its vast and misplaced authority to criticizing its performance at its designated functions. Following the July 3 military coup,[1] Sisi asked Egyptians for authorization to support a "war on terrorism," which turned out to be a crusade against

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[1] There are different perspectives on the use of the term *coup* to describe the ouster of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013.

political opposition, especially the Muslim brotherhood (Hamid, 2015). Wondering at the military's inability to face ISIS's "'real' threat of terrorism, Hussein joked, "So, this authorization is only for fighting the 'potential' terrorism not the one 'for real'" (Joe Tube, 2014a). With pictures of macaroni and olive oil in the background (alluding to the military's vast food industry), Hussein exclaimed, "How about [the army/police] leave politics to protect borders instead. . . . Oh, no, that won't work . . . they did not pay 50,000 LE bribes [to join the police] to serve us, sons of dogs" (Joe Tube, 2014b). The N2O team addressed a similar rhetoric of security over democracy by parodying the transnational show *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?* Asking "What is the country of safety and security?" it offered only Scandinavian countries as options. When the contestant asked for a friend's help—the prime minister—he was met with a resounding "Jordan" as the only answer.

More specific criticisms tackled the military's incompetence sometimes masked by its guarded secrecy and claimed "control." In a collaboration between Hussein and vlogger Tamer Gamal, they enacted a scene in what appeared to be the private office of a high military official. Following several unsuccessful attempts to enter through a biometric authentication device, Gamal calls from inside the office for Hussein to use the doorknob (Joe Tube, 2014c). By subtly alluding to the military's economic empire coupled with an inferior technological competence, Hussein worked to subvert the myth of a heroic self-denying military to ultimately question its legitimacy (Joe Tube, 2014c). Addressing the popular argument that "the army protects us," Hussein exclaimed, "Well, haven't they taken their money!" He likened this to a carpenter affirming that "he fixed the door for 'you,' or a plumber nudging you, 'I fixed the pipes for you.'" He wondered,

> So apparently everyone gets paid, except Egypt's army, they work for free! [asking rhetorically] Have you ever heard of army officers taking the highest salaries in Egypt? Or officers with allotted apartments, residential areas and private beaches? That's why they are "earth's best soldiers"! (Joe Tube, 2014b)

Fady Idrees, a Tunisian stand-up comedian of *N2OComedy*, addressed the more salient and notorious state apparatus of intelligence and its undeclared job of spying on citizens in most Arab-speaking countries. His political criticism, though originating in the political, soon flowed into the social, where he suggested that it should not be surprising if family members spied, too, noting that parental and state authoritarianism share the same mentality (N2OComedy, 2012a).

Subverting State Media

Though Egyptian youth activists were initially celebrated by state media as the "generation of the revolution," this position soon turned into strategic antagonism, where they were accused of treason and receiving foreign funds (currently criminalized by the new Egyptian constitution rewritten after the coup). They harnessed the digital media capacities of storage and recording to document, compare, and contrast the different state-loyal media treatment of the same topics over time, depending on who is in power.

Bassem Youssef pioneered criticism of state-loyal media in numerous episodes of his earlier and later shows (Albernameg, 2011a, 2011b). In an episode titled "I'lam Aldarabuka" (Media of *darabuka*:

colloquial term for belly-dancing rhythms indicative of wavering), he noted how state-loyal media returned to grooming the interim military council leader as it used to do with Mubarak. Accompanied by a goblet drum player, Youssef remixed media segments recorded during Mubarak's rule and others recorded during military council's rule to expose their return to state loyalty despite their claims of reform (Albernameg, 2011c).

Alongside exposing state media's subservience to the state narrative, Egyptian youth sought to uncover the absurdity of this narrative as well. Following several terror attacks in Sinai, Sisi issued a proclamation demanding the forced migration of Rafah/Sinai residents near the Egyptian border with Israel under the claim of creating a secure buffer zone. Hussein noted state media's euphemisms in replacing words such as *displacement* and *forced evacuation* with a benign word such as *moving* while portraying those affected as "pleased and content" (Joe Tube, 2014e). With an audience of mostly young city dwellers (away from the remote Sinai), Hussein helped them visualize the absurdity of this proclamation through humorous incongruity and exaggeration. Posing as a TV anchor, Hussein received calls from "content" Rafah residents expressing their delight (and taking selfies) with their army-bombed houses. This is contrasted with a video of what appeared to be a more "authentic" account from real Rafah residents, who were outraged by the government's decision and dismayed at the loss of their homes and source of livelihood (Joe Tube, 2014e). Nudging the media's lack of credibility as well, Youssef jokingly noted how pundits notoriously cite themselves as sources for their own statements (Albernameg, 2012b).

Subverting Cultural Authority

Not all subversions were political; Jordanian youth, unable to criticize political figures or their policy decisions, focused on wider social phenomena, breaking down social taboos and questioning cultural habits. Online spaces, perhaps presumed by youth to be parent-free, enabled their criticisms to flow more freely without fear of backlash. In two episodes titled "The Father" and "The Mother," Ragaee El-Kawas, a Jordanian stand-up comedian, took aim at parental authority (N2OComedy, 2011a, 2011c). Building on familiar social situations and common expressions used by parents, he noted their desire for controlling the movement and the financial spending of their children. "A father thinks himself a detective: 'why is your door closed?' 'Why are you sleeping on your tummy?' 'what are you watching?' 'Oh! The weather channel!'" El-Kawas recounted (N2OComedy, 2011a).

Criticisms of authority expanded to cover managerial authority. El-Kawas noted how managers drew on team spirit, urging youth to work harder, "so [they] can grow together"; wondering why it was only managers who grew in the process. "You mean age together . . . it's not a family tie, you know, if it can end suddenly!" he added (N2OComedy, 2011b). Thus, in the process of drawing laughs, El-Kawas was breaking down taboos that scrutinize making fun of authority, leaving the audience ambivalent, entertained yet uneasy, about whether his goal was merely entertainment or subversion.

Youth criticisms of authority flowed fluidly between social and political spaces in a productive cross-fertilization. Though generally refraining from open criticism of political leadership, they took aim at the consequences of failed leadership and its economic policies. Idrees used a familiar social situation to hint at structural inequality:

When asked what will I be when I grow up, I used to say doctor, engineer, etc. . . . only to find out that I cannot be a doctor just by wanting; Instead, I should have been asked, does your father have enough money to merit you becoming a doctor? (N2OComedy, 2013a)

Egyptian satirist Bassem Youssef, however, was more direct. Starting off with a political question, he wondered why Mubarak was not yet tried and sentenced one year after the revolution. His discourse soon flowed into the social when he showed state media segments likening Mubarak to a father and people to his children. Youssef took aim at the absurdity of an older generation's argument against Mubarak's removal on grounds of his age and status. In one of Youssef's selected media segments, a famous Egyptian actor exonerated Mubarak for his obliviousness to state atrocities, suggesting, "If someone had ten children, he would not know if one of them inhaled marijuana, what of a president with 83 million children!" Another prominent TV personality described Mubarak as "the one who brought the 'kids,' the Internet." Youssef exclaimed, "Thank God, if it had not been for our father, we would have been still using smoke signals!" (Albernameg, 2012a).

Just as criticisms of political authorities targeted their underlying myths, social criticisms were used to unmask some of the metaphenomena that underlie various social practices. Jude Batayena, a stand-up comedian at Kharabesh, sought to change society's perceptions of plus-size women so people can see beyond their weight. She wondered at her friends' and family's disapproval: "Jude, why are you telling people that you are overweight?" She responded, "I am not telling people. . . . Being overweight is a reality in me, just as I have two eyes and a nose; I am overweight!" She perceptually showed how even benign comments can betray unspoken prejudices by noting how it escaped them sometimes, "So why do you tell them that you are ugly?" "I never said I was!" she replied (N2OComedy, 2012b).

Social taboos were broken not only figuratively but literally in the form of language. In societies where speech profanity is still a marker of social class, Arab comedians used language to break down these social separators and navigate the space between derisive humor (that surprises, shocks, or offends) and safe joking (that entertains). El-Kawas, for example, was not timid about using mild profanity, such as cursing the butts of his jokes or challenging universal rules of conversation. In an episode titled "Thunderstorm Showers," he discussed farting, burping, and nose poking, bordering the line between what is humorous and what is shocking (N2OComedy, 2011d). Douglas (1968) notes that, while a "joke discloses a meaning hidden under the appearance of the first, the obscenity is a gratuitous intrusion" (p. 371). However, "abominations depend upon the social context to be perceived as such" (p. 371). The social context of an online youth culture might have encouraged El-Kawas to experiment with more daring jokes.

Redefining Identity

Working to deconstruct myths of political and cultural authority went hand in hand with attempts to redefine youth identities outside their parents' "regimes of truth." At the group level, laughter may function to strengthen "a sense of group cohesion" by "widening the gap between those within and those outside the circle of laughter" (Levine, 1978, p. 359). Humor itself is an interactive experience and a social

phenomenon among those who share a sense of commonality of experience (Levine, 1978). Hence, humor can act as a means of identity demarcation, defining those who share the joke as "we" and those who do not as the "other."

Through humor, youth sought to establish their generational identity while simultaneously negotiating their national and ideological identity over a rapidly changing sociopolitical terrain. Starting their routines with "We the youth," they were asserting their generational identity while narrowing their target audience to youth. Confronted with global alternatives, they questioned myths of superiority and nationalism in light of upheavals to look for new expressions of identity that were not bound to national borders. Manuel Castells (1996) centralizes the role of identity as it relates to global order,

> In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity . . . becomes the fundamental source of social meaning . . . in a historical period characterized by widespread destructuring of organizations, delegitimation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions. (p. 3)

However, the youth sought to reestablish their national identities not through nationalistic ideals and pride in past achievements like their parents but rather through self-criticism: identifying through their common fallibilities. These criticisms were sometimes advanced in the most benign of language and framing. For example, the *N2O* team criticized Arab-speaking societies' contradictions with regard to practicing sports, such as commending its practice while considering it a distraction, and zealous fandom with no physical practice. Waseem Awabedah wondered at expressions such as, "I'll walk my legs to the cigarette booth!" He suggested that perhaps Arabs practice sports secretly or in other ways. Alluding to their lives of financial hardship in Jordan, he exclaimed, "Who said we never practice sports? How about the sport of slamming our heads against four walls [an expression of futility] . . . the sport of evading your mom's flip flops," or "the sport of carrying a gas cylinder up a flight of stairs!" (N2OComedy, 2012d). Using sports as a launching point, El-Kawas criticized the older generations,' especially Egyptians,' ethnocentricity and pride in past achievements:

> The ignorant backward West had us believe that they are more progressed because they invented the word "Olympics" [Olemboyad in Arabic]; this is completely false! There was a man from . . . Egypt, who was trying to teach his son correct pronunciation, and he was telling him "Ol" [say] "embo" [baby talk for *water*] "yad" [colloquial for *boy*]. (N2OComedy, 2012d)

The youth's redefinition of Arab identity through self-criticism distinguished itself from an older generation's notion of guarded nationalism, where open criticism of one's culture in a Western context may be taken as a sign of Westernization and moral betrayal. Kharabeesh, untraditionally, included an American on its team of stand-up comedians. Brett Weer, an American stand-up comedian living in Jordan, wondered what it would be like if Arabs did Formula One racing:

It would be the first time a driver has his whole family with him, with his *hamatoh* [mother-in-law] in the front seat and his *Ibn 'ammo* [cousin] at the back seat, and there'd be about four kids and none of them would have seat belts on . . . it will be the first ever Formula One Kia-Sephia race car. (N2OComedy, 2012d)

Self-criticism was sometimes more pointed toward their specific identity as youth and not only Arabs. In an episode titled "The Arab Spring," *N2O* comedians criticized foreign interference in the Arab Spring, which resulted in what they called "Arab Spring with American, Russian, and Chinese flavors"; yet they did so while humorously suggesting that "the youth will not be silent against those wolves! For they will hold yet another meeting!" (N2OComedy, 2012c).

Ideas of national citizenship were also challenged. Nicholas Khoury, a Palestinian stand-up comedian at *N2OComedy* and *Kawabonga*, an offshoot of Kharabeesh, redefined racism as nationalistic pride, suggesting that

Racism starts when we are forcibly placed inside a square drawn by the occupation, yet are proud of belonging to this square . . . what have you done to belong to this square? It's natural selection my friend! Love your country as you like, but do not hate others for it. (ArabComics, 2014)

In Egypt, questions of identity manifested themselves along political and ideological lines. *Joe Tube* pushed against the notion of citizenship by questioning who is a good citizen in light of the media's persistent usage of the term to describe thugs and progovernment protesters (Joe Tube, 2013). Ideological differences manifested in the style and language of jokes. Conservative youth, for example, known for their slur-free speech, not only created this identity but were constrained by it. Out of fear of being called hypocrites, they harnessed digital media to tread the line between jokes and insults without having to utter slurs themselves. Superimposing the face of Sisi over a movie character being insulted or ridiculed sufficed to deliver their message and subvert his political sanctity (Joe Tube, 2014f). At other times, they pretended to speak in defense of Sisi while contrasting their words with visuals that incriminate or insult him, hardly delivering their message directly, as this may render it too serious or even an anti-joke (Lewis, 2006).

Secular comedians, however, were more open to using profanity and curse words in their routines despite the general cultural disapprobation. The use of slurs by secular commentators not only served to draw the line between liberal and conservative ideologies but targeted a specific type of audience that was particularly young and liberal. In doing so, they were implicitly asserting a long-standing distinction from religiously conservative youth in their ability to break free of religious and social constraints. This tension was sometimes verbalized in their opinions of one another; in an interview with vlogger Tamer Gamal, he criticized affluent surgeon Bassem Youssef for using slurs or inappropriate allusions in his sketches (AlShabab Channel, 2012).

This ideological distinction was also manifest along class lines, where secular comedians, despite their occasional use of slurs, often utilized Western cultural references, such as Bob Marley, and English

expressions as a way of relating to the youthful yet affluent Western-educated sector of society, while, *Joe Tube* (not identifiably secular) emphasized its affinity to the majority of working- and middle-class Egyptians at the risk of poverty. The affinity was evident in their choice of language, which drew on social references to life in small underserved villages utilizing working-class colloquial Arabic (AlShabab, 2012).

Exercising Control

In Danielle Russell's (2002) study of women stand-up comedians, she notes that "stand-up comedy is an aggressive act; to elicit laughter is to exert control, even power" (para. 10). One of the main sources of laughter, Levine (1978) argues, is the desire to put the situation in which we find ourselves into perspective and to exert some degree of control over our environments. Youth, often lacking the means to exercise power over their immediate governments and societies, turned to online platforms to reclaim their sense of control and assert their power through humor and mastery of digital tools.

At the forefront were women Arab satirists. Though Egyptian and Arab popular cultures are rife with women comedians, female stand-up comedy remains an emergent cultural form in its ability to reinterpret and redefine social relations. Subverting situations in which women are being judged to ones where they are the judges allowed them to be in control of what Bey (1985/2002) calls a "temporary autonomous zone," a liberated area "of land, of time, of imagination" without direct confrontation with social values.

Using a public, somewhat context-free medium, women comedians were able to take the edge off opinions that might otherwise deem them aggressive or overly sensitive if expressed off-line, thereby regaining control over similar future situations. In her video "Plus-size is an art," Jude Batayena criticized her friends' seemingly tactful plea, "Let's lose weight together," to wonder about this element of "togetherness." "How can we lose weight 'together'? How much will you lose, four pounds?" she asked. Regaining control over the situation, she asked instead, "How about we gain weight together?" (N2OComedy, 2012b).

Subversions also touched upon men's dress. In an episode titled "There's No Hope Guys," Rawsan Halaq, another woman stand-up comedian, poked fun at young men's futile attempts to impress college girls using failing fashion trends. In the context of Arab societies that place strong emphasis on women's dress, linking it to society's chastity, this served to overturn the situation to one where men's dress was the object of scrutiny (N2OComedy, 2014).

Conclusion

When politics draws on social mystifications and tribal traditions, resistance takes on wider meanings and repercussions, where social subversion feeds into political subversion and vice versa. Harnessing the power of humor and digital media technologies, Arab youth were able to covertly navigate between social and political spaces while asserting their generational identity, seeking to both control and subvert a situation where they had limited control. At this time of demoralization and silenced outrage, the

need arouse for alternative sources of hope, while the ongoing social conflict called for tactics that could poach social situations without openly challenging them.

By relying on humor that lies at the boundary between social acceptance and challenge, Arab youth were able to navigate previously deemed taboo or inappropriate topics and open them up for public discussion. Their strategy was, "Don't argue about corrupt ideas, ridicule them" (Windt, 1972, p. 13). Jokes were a temporary displacement from the control of the conscious to the arbitrariness of the subconscious, hence unaccountable. The joker's goal was merely to "lighten the oppressiveness of a social reality": a "ritual purifier" performing a cathartic function for both him and society (Douglas, 1968). Because jokers work within the constraints of the social structure (Douglas, 1968), they were relatively safe from backlash. Their playful nature was a double tactic—on one hand, disguising dissent from power and, on the other hand, facilitating a quasi-political discussion across political differences. Their safety, however, was contingent on a balance between social and political criticism, their number of followers, and international recognition (where stakes were higher for those less known and/or of an outwardly opposing political affiliation).

Hence, the struggle of young Arab vloggers took place not only in the bastions of power but in the realm of consciousness. Masked by their humorous overtones, they were sometimes invisible to "an omnipresent and all powerful" state, occupying online spaces "clandestinely and carry[ing] on . . . its festal purposes for quite a while in *relative* [emphasis added] peace" (Bey, 1985/2002, p. 118). Humor enabled them to reconcile their hidden contradictions, navigate their changing reality, and come to terms with an irreconcilable oppressive past. Signaling a departure from a culture that reveres authority to one that laughs at it, Egyptian activist and documentary filmmaker Baraa Ashraf (2015), wrote in a Facebook post,

> I really appreciate the effort of everyone who [works in mainstream comedy]. . . . It's not your fault . . . your jokes used to make us laugh in 2008. . . . But right now, we are in 2015. . . . Either bring us an "authority" that we cannot laugh at . . . or bring us back Bassem Youssef to save your efforts and ours . . . and don't worry, we will laugh while silent.

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