

Humour: A Change Agent in the Arab World

Pedro Rojo Pérez

President

Al Fanar Foundation for Arab Knowledge¹, Madrid

The reactions in the Arab world to the controversial depictions of the Prophet Mohammed by various European cartoonists reinforced the already widespread impression in the West that Arabs are a belligerent and humourless bunch. This is a well-established stereotype in the Western imagination due to the images usually shown on television: bearded men shouting unintelligible threats or cowering women enveloped in yards of billowing fabric. However, while this remains the mainstream impression, new media, in particular, the Internet, are helping to introduce the West to the eclectic Arab sense of humour, which is heir to a rich tradition.

As in any other society, in the Arab world satire has been used to relativise difficult situations and as a natural way to make fun of the other. Indeed, some would argue that humour is what most sets humans apart from other animals.

Humour: A Constant in Arab History

Even in pre-Islamic times, Arab culture produced satirical poems that were used in times of war to ridicule enemy tribes. At that time, humour was so widespread, that whole studies have been conducted to analyse the sense of humour of the Prophet Mohammed and the people he surrounded himself with and how this sarcasm was reflected in the Koran (Kish-tainy, 1985). From the learned poets of the Abbasid court to the popular folklore embodied in the stories

about Juha, a sense of humour has remained part of Arab society to the present day. However, just as it does today, Arab humour has faced bitter enemies throughout history, enemies who have been unreceptive to mockery and criticism. According to legend, it was a caustic poem that cost the famous poet Al-Mutanabbi (915-68 AD) his life.

Arab Cartoons: A Key Component of Political Humour

Humour has always offered an outlet for dealing with unjust situations, with the feeling of impotence caused by unfulfilled promises and with despotic regimes that have little regard for the day-to-day activities of their subjects, who, in turn, trade jokes and taunts about their leaders to score everyday Pyrrhic victories. The irreverence that humour allows has made it a political weapon, a vehicle for reflecting popular indignation, and a social change agent. In this regard, political cartoons were an early medium for spreading direct criticism camouflaged as “harmless” comic strips to avoid censorship. From the start, Arab cartoons have dealt with both political and social issues.

Without question, the most influential figure in the world of Arab graphic humour was the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, who achieved a previously inconceivable level of popular influence with his cartoons, provoking a great impact in this type of art; an influence that would later tragically cost him his life, in London in 1987.

His most famous character, the Palestinian boy Handala, became an icon, still in use today, of the Palestinian people's struggle. The school of Arab cartoonists

¹ www.fundacionalfanar.com

Without question, the most influential figure in the world of Arab graphic humour was the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, who achieved a previously inconceivable level of popular influence with his cartoons

influenced by Naji al-Ali seeks to showcase how society suffers under the power of the oppressor (be it Zionist, Arab or international in origin) rather than fly the flag of their homelands against the historical enemy. Indeed, many Arab cartoonists give more importance to the message they wish to convey than to the humour of the cartoon itself, sacrificing laughs for the sake of achieving their goal. It is a dry humour that has arisen from the dramatic situations it reflects.

It is the characters that deal with social issues, such as Abu Mahjoob, by the Jordanian cartoonist Emad Hajjaj, that, by ridiculing citizens themselves and stretching stereotypes to the breaking point, manage to elicit a chuckle from readers who recognise themselves in the situations being depicted. The importance of comics is also largely due to the high levels of illiteracy, both real and functional, afflicting Arab societies. A powerful drawing with little text can reach a much broader audience and have a much greater impact than a newspaper article. This capacity to influence, along with the irreverent nature of their art, has made the relationship between Arab cartoonists and Arab authorities quite complex. Many Arab cartoonists have had problems with censorship and the powers that be, such as the Moroccan artist Khalid Gueddar, who was sentenced to three years in prison, or the Syrian Ali Ferzat, who was beaten and had his fingers broken by thugs from the Syrian regime. The Israeli authorities likewise keep a close eye on the work of Palestinian cartoonists and have no qualms about taking action against them, the most recent case being that of the young cartoonist from the daily *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, Mohammad Saba'aneh, who was arrested and held for six months.

The porous borders of the Internet allow solidarity networks and advocates of freedom of the press to support cartoonists against government threats. This opening up also facilitates the exchange and

dissemination of their work, which is mutually enriching and increases the number of opportunities for them to collaborate with other artists on international projects such as *Cartooning for Peace* or the *Cartoon Movement*. The possibilities the Internet affords of reaching a broader audience also entail more social control of the work. So-called social censorship plays an important role when it comes to challenging social taboos, but because humour is largely transgressive and, thus, precisely aims to push the limits of what is expected, it also generates tensions in certain segments of the population, who can now use social media to target authors directly with their aggressive reactions and threats.

New Possibilities for Arab Humour

New technologies have undeniably enabled an explosion of creativity in the world of Arab humour. Until the advent of the Internet, humorous works aimed at large audiences were confined to crude, unsophisticated comedy, punctuated with ridiculous screeches and hammy shouts, the greatest exponents of which were comedic plays and Egyptian sitcoms, many of which were broadcast across the Arab world. Three factors, all deeply indebted to software and film piracy, have facilitated the new boom: young Arabs' ever-increasing tech savvy, the falling costs of home productions, and access to cultural output from the rest of the world. The biggest do-it-yourself success story is that of Bassem Youssef, the Egyptian heart surgeon turned top comedian in the Arab world. When the revolution broke out in 2011, he was helping as a physician in Tahrir Square. During the uprisings, he combined this work with the creation of humorous home videos that he uploaded to YouTube, in which he breathed new life into the best version of the famous Egyptian sense of humour. His videos went viral, affording him the chance to make the leap to the small screen, where he created the weekly show *Al Bernameg (The Programme)*, modelled on the structure and philosophy of the American programme *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. The wave of freshness, self-confidence and iconoclastic satire of the establishment was hard for most of his targets to stomach. During his Presidency, Mohamed Morsi was the primary focus of the various segments, in which Youssef exercised an unprecedented degree of freedom in the Arab world to mercilessly

criticise the current President. The relationship was not an easy one. Although the authorities tried to shut down the programme several times under the usual pretexts of “insulting the country and Islam” and “endangering national security,” its tremendous popularity and international pressure (including numerous awards and shows of support, such as that proffered by *Jon Stewart* himself), obliged the President to order the prosecution to drop the charges. Following General Sisi’s coup, the programme continued in the same vein, criticising the country’s new strongmen in yet another show of bravery, given the forcefulness with which the military government has come down on critical journalists. Finally, after receiving various threats, being accused once again of endangering national security, and having to suspend the programme in May during the electoral campaign for the presidential elections, on 2 June, Bassem Youssef announced that he would be pulling the cord on the programme for good, as he was tired of having to change networks and of the constant fear he felt for both his own and his family’s physical safety.

Above and beyond this specific case, former boundaries have clearly been crossed and alternative media have emerged as means of circumventing this type of censorship. In Egypt, many comedy projects now take aim at absolutely every aspect of society, including President Sisi. One such project is the website *Asa7by* (My Friends), developed by Shady Sedky and Ahmed Mido using minimal resources, which has earned more than six million likes on Facebook with a formula based on annotated photoshopped images. According to its creators, the goal is to keep people on their toes, to make them laugh at absolutely everything, even politically and socially thorny issues, such as sexual harassment. Using a format more similar to Bassem Youssef’s show, the young Ahmed El-Zekairy and Youssef “Joe” Hussen created the *Joe Tube* channel, which has already garnered more than a million followers. Taking advantage of the “gifts” offered by the military and like-minded television networks, the two put together segments that mock not only General Sisi, but also the Egyptian Mufti, for switching sides following Morsi’s ouster, or in which they laugh at supposed terrorists and radical Islamists.

Although these types of programmes have certainly fared best in Egypt within the Arab world, others from other Arab countries also have thousands of followers, such as the Syrian programme “*It’s a goat,*

even though it flies,” an underground broadcast featuring a masked host whose voice has been distorted. As with the political comics, more importance is given to the aim of the programme (to attack the al-Assad regime) than to its humorous goal, which is merely an excuse to make it. The Jordanian group “*Street Theatre*” likewise began with meagre resources, putting on their provocative performances in the streets; they eventually ended up with their own slot on the private channel Roya TV.

The space for freedom that opened up in the wake of the Arab revolutions and with the rise of the Internet has been used not only by spontaneous artists, but also cartoonists, such as the Jordanians *Khara-beesh*; the Egyptians *Egyptoon*; the wacky neighbourhood of *Freej*, an Emirati cartoon described as “the Arab Simpsons,” starring four “traditional” women, who, through their goofy foibles, send up current Emirati society; or the Saudi cartoon *Masamir*, created by Faisal Amer, available as a mobile app and on YouTube, some of whose episodes have logged more than five million views.

All of the new satirical programmes are naturally produced in the local dialect. However, the use of dialect is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it allows artists to reach the local audience directly; however, it does so at the expense of the pan-Arab dimension, as some of the jokes, will be lost on audiences from other countries

The Challenges Facing the New Arab Humour

The size of this audience is especially significant for programmes not produced in the Egyptian dialect, which is understood throughout the Arab world thanks to the historical dominance of Egyptian cinema and television series. All of the new satirical programmes are naturally produced in the local dialect. Although there is still some debate over whether classical Arabic or dialects should be used to create

classical literature, the issue simply does not come up in relation to these fresher, more spontaneous productions. However, the use of dialect is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it allows artists to reach the local audience directly; however, it does so at the expense of the pan-Arab dimension, as some of the jokes, based as they are on local vernacular, will be lost on audiences from other countries. The use of dialectical Arabic has likewise gone hand in hand with the growing use of swear words and lewd expressions, which Arab societies, though used to hearing them on the street, are not quite used to hearing in the media, even in a satirical context, much less when a programme is supposed to be family-oriented. Many of these problems have been solved through direct contact between the audience and the artists via social media, giving rise to a candid jargon that, while still lively and innovative, is acceptable in family contexts.

The challenge for all of these artists is to consolidate this recently achieved space for freedom, to continue to defend the healthiness of being able to make fun of any situation or figure, and not to renounce their ability to lampoon even the President of the Republic himself in what has been a clear victory of the Egyptian revolution. As Bassem Youssef said in his farewell *press conference* “[...] Shutting down the show is a victory, as it means our voice will be heard even louder, since we have not agreed to lower the bar, as others have done, just to keep our jobs” and in so doing, the implication goes, surrendered the freedom we fought so

hard to win. Despite this setback, there seems to be no turning back. All that remains to be seen is which media Arab creators will continue to use to perpetuate and broaden the margin of freedom they have already won and, through intelligent satire, to continue fuelling the fire of the social change already underway in Arab societies.

References and links

- KISHTAINY, Khalid. *Arab Political Humour*. London: Quartet Books, 1985.
- Cartoon Movement: www.cartoonmovement.com
- Cartooning for Peace: www.cartooningforpeace.org
- Al Bernameg: www.youtube.com/user/albernameg
- Jon Stewart: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyDOAQNsTrI&feature=youtu.be&t=47s
- Asa7by: www.facebook.com/asa7bess
- Joe Tube: www.youtube.com/user/JoeTubeVid
- “It’s a goat, even though it flies”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRh4hd9zl-w
- “Street Theatre”: www.youtube.com/user/Masra7AlShare3?feature=watch
- Kharabeesh: www.youtube.com/user/Kharabeesh-Cartoons
- Egyptoon: www.youtube.com/channel/UCJlSdBR7KYYAw1CjYN5msvg
- Freej: www.freej.ae
- Masamir: www.youtube.com/user/nejercom
- Bassem Youssef’s press conference: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DL5Gtp_JcU#t=93