A Comic Revolution: Comedian Bassem Youssef as a Voice for Oppressed Egyptians

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Abstract
After being inspired by both The Daily Show and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, Egyptian surgeon Bassem Youssef created Egypt's only satirical news show. Youssef's show, Al Bernameg, provides a unique perspective within the country's mostly conservative news media. Through the lens of Kenneth Burke's comic frame of acceptance and Mark Orbe's co-cultural theory, I examine the rhetorical style of the show. I find that while Al Bernameg does have similarities with its US counterpart, the use of the comic frame as a voice for the oppressed within an emerging democracy produces some important differences. Through the comic frame, Youssef critiques both the media and the new government and provides viewers with the chance to reflect on competing perspectives. His occasional steps outside of the comic frame are necessary in a society that has heard primarily one perspective for many years. This research offers an opportunity to better understand how voices struggle can be heard in cultures where they were silenced for so long.

In the first few months of 2011, Egypt’s Tahrir Square became the center point for revolution against President Hosni Mubarak and his oppressive dictatorship. During this struggle for democracy, violent clashes left 846 people dead and 6,000 more injured (BBC News, 2011). Egyptian heart surgeon Bassem Youssef witnessed this violence firsthand. In fact, he provided medical help to those hurt by it. However, when he turned on the television to hear more about the struggle for democracy, he saw a completely different story presented in the news media. According to Youssef, the news media tried to lead the Egyptian people to believe that these protestors were not in Tahrir Square out of frustration (Albanese & Stewart, 2012). Instead, the protesters were persuaded to protest by enemies. Youssef knew this was wrong, but he also knew that within this blossoming democracy he had the power to do something to change it (Albanese & Stewart, 2012).
On Feb. 11, 2011, after the death of hundreds of Egyptians, President Mubarak’s government was overthrown. Immediately following the fall of the Mubarak government, Youssef decided that Egypt needed its own Jon Stewart, so he developed a television show that critically examines Egyptian political, religious, and social issues (Kingsley, 2013). After *The B+ Show* received one million views in the first week, Youssef was offered a huge deal with Egyptian television (Hassan, 2011). Currently, Egyptian satellite channel Capital Broadcasting Center (CBC) airs the newest incarnation of the weekly show, called *Al Bernameg*, but it can also be watched on YouTube. Controversy surrounds the show because Youssef does not shy away from criticism of those in power. In December, he took on a conservative Egyptian show’s negative coverage of a liberal protest. In response, the conservative show accused Youssef of a number of negative actions, including sexual immorality. These accusations only created more material for Youssef to mock (Radwan, 2012). “I had no idea I was this stimulating,” he quipped in response to these criticisms. Currently, Egyptian prosecutors are investigating Youssef for his attacks on current Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi (Kirkpatrick, 2012).

After being inspired by *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*’s coverage of the 2011 revolution in Egypt, Youssef used its template to create his own version of the satirical news show. Since developing *The B+ Show* and *Al Bernameg*, he has been called the Egyptian Jon Stewart. While his show is funny, it reveals that comedy is not simply about making the audience laugh. It’s also revolutionary. It allows struggles with power to be addressed in a non-violent way. Examples of comedy as revolution may be found throughout the world, so Youssef’s show is not alone. However, Youssef has taken Egypt by surprise with his revolutionary comedy. His rhetorical style offers Egyptians a unique form of communication against their oppressors. With this paper, I hope to examine how Youssef uses the comic frame to serve as a voice for the oppressed in Egypt.

While a large amount of research exists on satirical news shows like *The Daily Show*, Youssef’s show, *Al Bernameg*, is a new opportunity to expand on this existing research. *Al Bernameg* and its development within an emerging democracy provide unique context for a better understanding of this expanding form of journalism. The purpose of this research is to show the special contribution *Al Bernameg* provides to one type of satirical news show called comic journalism. Comic journalism presents news through what rhetorician Kenneth Burke terms a “comic frame of acceptance,” an attitudinal lens that allows the audience to reflect on numerous perspectives of an issue rather than one side. A rhetorical criticism of *Al Bernameg* helps explain how the show fits
into this style. The goal of this rhetorical criticism is to explore the strengths and weaknesses of this new show to add to the definition of comic journalism.

This research also aims to respond to the criticisms of comic journalism that says it simply encourages viewers to have negative feelings toward the government (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006).

As shown throughout this paper, existing research gives illustration to these points. First of all, Mark Orbe’s work on co-cultural theory (1998) sets the foundation of my theoretical framework. Other research on this theory helps build up from this foundation. Second, Painter and Hodges (2010) are among the many researchers who assist in explaining comic journalism and the rhetorical style of Youssef and other comic journalists. Finally, research providing historical context for the political turmoil in Egypt (Ali, 2011) shows the uniqueness of the situation.

As I explore this topic, I include (1) a brief review of previous literature dealing with comic journalism and how the show fits within this style; (2) an explanation of Burke’s notion of the comic frame of acceptance and how this frame aligns with parts of Orbe’s co-cultural theory; (3) a closer look at how Youssef’s show uses comic journalism to communicate for marginalized Egyptians; and (4) a discussion of implications of this analysis, including consideration of how Youssef’s style could be used in the future. The goal of this paper is to provide the reader with a better understanding of (1) how Youssef’s show fits in to the comic journalism style; (2) how Youssef’s rhetorical style helps him serve as a mouthpiece for the oppressed; and (3) how this style can be used to help other marginalized groups express themselves. If comedy is revolutionary, a better understanding of these three aspects could help spark change in other areas of the world.

**Comic Journalism throughout the World**

While the theoretical framework discussed in the next section provides some direction on which lenses to apply to the rhetorical style of Youssef, existing literature provides context for how this and other political news shows have served as a voice for oppressed members of society. The literature sheds some light on the ways comedy is used throughout the world as well as how this rhetorical style can be both a positive and a negative for society. The existing literature also offers a chance to examine how Youssef was inspired by the coverage of *The Daily Show’s* coverage of the Egyptian revolution and provide context for the current situation in Egypt. As this literature reveals, the comic
frame is a popular rhetorical style for many satirical news journalists, especially in tumultuous times.

In many parts of the globe, comedy is being used to speak against the dominant ideology. Influenced by the “inherently contradictory process” of globalization, two Indian satirical news shows, one in Hindi and the other in English, feature parody similar to those found across the globe (Kumar, 2012, p. 89). Kumar (2012) theorizes that the reporters choose satire because its “ambiguity” is harder to regulate than “direct and obvious political criticism” of other types of news (p. 83). Also according to Kumar (2012), the indirectness of satire thrived in India at various points in its history because of censorship that comes with tumultuous times. If this is true, it makes sense that Iran also has its own form of comic news shows. Funded by the U.S. government, the 30 minute Iranian satirical news show Parazit is a way for Iranians to express themselves in a form the Iranian government does not allow. Financially supported by Voice of America, which is a broadcast company funded by the U.S. government, the show can only be viewed through illegal means, like illegal access to the Internet (Semati, 2012). The show was created in response to the Iranian government’s jamming of satellite signals and the English translation of the title (static) reflects the producers’ frustrations. It is an attempt to fill in gaps created by these jams. However, there are some kinks that need to be worked out within the show. Semati (2012) found the show to have “chauvinistic tendencies” and poor interview techniques (p. 128).

In other parts of the world, satire is used to exercise the right of free speech and encourage laughter in tough times (Sienkiewicz, 2012). Recently, a Palestinian sketch comedy program called Watan Ala Watar tried to do that through its “taboo-breaking” sketches (Sienkiewicz, 2012, p. 111). The show critiques many aspects of Palestinian society, including the Israeli occupation (Sienkiewicz, 2012). Although initially supportive of the program, Palestinian authorities eventually banned it from Palestinian airwaves. While Palestinians turned to new media to watch the program, Sienkiewicz (2012) found that despite being able to laugh at the oppressor, when the comedy is over, the common man is still without power at the end of the show. However, this lack of power may not be true for all comic journalists. For example, a news segment on a German version of The Daily Show called The Heute Show resulted in the firing of a German lobbyist (Kleinen-von Konigslow & Keel, 2012). Much like its U.S. counterpart, The Heute Show is partisan (Kleinen-von Konigslow & Keel, 2012), but does its best to be civil to those they do not agree with.
Kleinen-von Konigsnow and Keel (2012) believe that in order for this show to affect politics in a big way, the show must boost their political profile.

Moving from Germany to the United States, The Daily Show resonates with viewers more powerfully than other entertainment news sources in the country (Feldman & Young, 2008). The show uses humor to communicate news stories, including political campaign news and meta-coverage of campaign reports by other news programs (Wise & Brewer, 2010). Although originally labeled a “fake” news show, it has become a popular news source for young viewers. A 2012 Pew Research Center report found that more young people turn to The Daily Show than other news sources such as The New York Times, The Economist, and The Wall Street Journal. According to Painter and Hodges (2010), Stewart serves as the voice of the people to express its frustration with the news media. He holds the news media accountable and, in turn, encourages media literacy and critique amongst his audience (Painter & Hodges, 2010; Baym, 2005). The Daily Show is a new form of journalism that forces politicians and journalists to reevaluate their techniques (Mutz, 2004), a form that this researcher has called comic journalism (a meta-analytical news source that encourages reflexivity and self-awareness of its audience).

Stewart’s brand of comic journalism has also been recognized as a way to promote cooperation amongst those with competing perspectives. In a 2012 article, Goldfarb calls Stewart “a critic of unreasonableleness and incivility,” and later adds that Stewart and other “democratic intellectuals” found in the media “work to subvert common sense, revealing problems that are hidden and civilize differences about pressing problems that enables people to work in concert” (p. 153).

Media scholars also laud the show for its coverage of news stories that do not receive as much attention in other national news broadcasts (Eddlem, 2011). Despite claims that the show is fake news, Stewart is “the most trusted man in America” and is compared to respected journalists like Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite (Eddlem, 2011). Eddlem (2011) admits that The Daily Show’s journalism is different from the objective goals of Murrow and Cronkite, but the author says they all three “rally the public for liberal causes” (2011, p. 44). While Stewart’s liberal causes are varied, one cause is particularly important for this paper: support for the Egyptian revolution. Following the 2011 Egyptian revolution, The Daily Show focused its coverage on the hypocrisy of the U.S. media while reporting the revolution. For example, on February 4, 2011 Jon Stewart attacked Fox News for alluding to the idea that the Egyptians might
vote for another dictator. Throughout *The Daily Show* coverage of this revolution, it stood up for the people of Egypt.

Inspired by this coverage, Egyptian surgeon Bassem Youssef decided to develop an Egyptian version of *The Daily Show*. After 60 years of suppression, Youssef, along with many other Egyptians, felt it was time to get his voice heard and he hoped to encourage others to do so as well (Reuters, 2011). Originally called *The B+ Show*, he produced the first incarnation of his show in his own apartment. Within the first few weeks, the YouTube show received a million hits (Hassan, 2011). Youssef quickly became a leading man on Egyptian television (Hassan, 2011). Despite his leading man status, production of the show has a very limited budget, especially when compared to *The Daily Show* (Marx, 2012). *Al Bernameg* tackles tough issues like constitutional reforms and disagreements within the Islamic religion (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Hassan 2011) with hopes of “bridging divides, offering a different perspective, and maybe even making people laugh” (Hassan, 2011).

The response to Youssef’s comic journalism has been mixed. Egyptian liberals feel “they have found a new champion” (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Some believe he has reclaimed Islam, showing those in power that Islam belongs to the oppressed just as much as it belongs to the powerful (Kirkpatrick, 2012). However, as one might expect, some have responded negatively to Youssef’s attack on the powerful. He has been accused of “sexual immorality and even poor hygiene” by his opponents (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Currently, prosecutors are investigating Youssef in regards to attacks on President Mohammad Morsi (Wright, 2013). This investigation places Youssef and his show in the middle of a freedom of speech controversy, as it is one of many similar investigations being conducted within this developing democracy (Wright, 2013).

Taking into account the previous research as well as the current attacks facing *Al Bernameg*, I find that the rhetorical strategies of Youssef warrant further examination in order to better understand how his symbolic choices could be affecting Egyptian society. First, Youssef’s use of humor, especially irony, as a rhetorical tool must be further examined to see how different techniques may affect society in different ways. Second, Youssef’s show may serve as the voice of the oppressed, but more needs to be examined to see if this is true. Finally, if Youssef and the oppressed want to get their voices heard, his rhetorical choices must be explored to see if the dominant class is likely to listen to him based on these rhetorical choices. If the goal is to cultivate a more cohesive Egyptian public, we should see if Youssef’s choices are the best tools to reach this goal.
A Co-cultural Use of the Comic Frame

While previous literature provides an important foundation for this study, the next step is to build up from the foundation to the framework that is utilized throughout the paper. In this section I (1) discuss how this paper examines Youssef and the situation surrounding him; (2) show what aspects of the show I review to perform the criticism of the situation; and (3) explain Mark Orbe’s co-cultural theory and Kenneth Burke’s comic frame of acceptance, two theories that are combined to serve as the lens to perform this criticism.

To better understand Youssef and his influence on the Egyptian society, I perform a rhetorical criticism of Youssef’s style within \textit{Al Bernameg}. A rhetorical criticism of this aspect of the show provides the reader with a thick description of the effects on both the dominant and oppressed Egyptians in the aftermath of a revolution. To effectively perform this criticism, I use translated clips of Youssef’s television show, interviews that Youssef has done with other members of the media, and current articles dealing with the response to Youssef. Two theories offer important lenses to help examine this situation closely. Co-cultural theory offers a framework for understanding how the oppressed speak out despite attempts to silence them. Kenneth Burke’s comic frame gives foundation to the style that Youssef is using to speak out for the oppressed.

Mark Orbe conceived co-cultural theory “to create a framework that promotes a greater understanding into the intricate processes by which co-cultural group members negotiate attempts by others to render their voices muted” (Orbe, 1998, p. 4). While developing this theory, Orbe used both muted group theory and standpoint theory as starting points. Muted group theory deals with different types of communication that the oppressed use to communicate in a world where their views are not represented. Standpoint theory is a feminist theory that says not all members within a group have the same vantage point. In standpoint theory, a marginalized point of view is just as true as the point of view of a dominant member of society.

With these two theories in mind, Orbe and his colleagues used a phenomenological approach to examine how co-cultural group members communicate in diverse groups. This approach allowed the researchers “to acknowledge persons as multidimensional and complex beings with particular social, cultural, and historical life circumstances” (Orbe, 1998, p. 6). After their analysis, Orbe found three main outcomes in the negotiation of the oppressed voice: assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Within these outcomes, he saw nine communication orientations, matching each of the outcomes with a
nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive descriptor. For example, those co-cultural communicators who maintain borders between other cultures fall into the nonassertive assimilation orientation. Those who confront the other culture are considered to be in the aggressive accommodation orientation. And those who try to educate the other culture about their own culture are in the assertive accommodation orientation.

Examples of a few accommodations are found throughout this paper. However, simply providing examples does not help the reader to better understand how effective Youssef’s style is in relation to getting the voice of the oppressed heard in Egyptian society. Kenneth Burke’s frames of acceptance illustrate how the use of different rhetorical styles is more effective than others. According to Burke in his book *Attitudes Toward History* (Burke, 1959/1984), humans choose to use two different frames of attitudinal ways of seeing and acting in the social world: one of acceptance or one of rejection. Frames centered on rejection are lacking, placing emphasis on one part or factor above all others. This frame takes its cues from authority and those who adopt this frame reject anyone who thinks differently than the norm. The acceptance frame, on the other hand, does not owe an allegiance to authority. Instead, those who adopt this frame are focused on how to agree to disagree when approached with an idea that they cannot support (Burke, 1959/1984).

In the beginning of *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke provides a clue regarding his feelings about comedy: “this book would accept the Aristophanic assumptions, which equate tragedy with war and comedy with peace” (Burke, 1959/1984, p. xvi). Burke sees the comic frame as one of acceptance. Whereas the tragic frame explains complex events as ones growing out of each other, the comic frame views this one event as actually being a number of different events happening at the same time. Those who see life from the comic frame of acceptance seek to highlight numerous perspectives of an issue rather than one side. Burke calls the comic frame the “most humane” frame because of its inclusive nature (Burke, 1959/1984, p. 42). Extrapolating from Burke, if Youssef hopes for peace, he should aim to use the comic frame of acceptance. Tragedy, and other frames of rejection, divides, creating thicker borders between different cultures. One of the goals of this paper is to show Youssef’s use of both frames and explain how favoring one of these frames can hurt or hinder the goals of the oppressed in Egypt.

Burke’s frames of acceptance and rejection and Orbe’s co-cultural theory offer a necessary framework for Youssef and the oppressed voices in Egypt. In the following section, I use these two theories to perform a rhetorical criticism
on Youssef’s show, examining how he uses a variety of rhetorical styles to express himself in a developing democracy. This criticism focuses on Youssef’s rhetorical style and how it may encourage the dominant class in Egypt to listen to the oppressed.

**Al Bernameg: A Voice for the Marginalized**

Taking all of the previous research into account and combining this research with the theoretical framework above, this section examines Youssef’s rhetorical style on *Al Bernameg*. It also provides some context of the current Egyptian struggles to better situate the content of the episodes discussed in the analysis. While each episode is important, for the purposes of this paper only five particular episodes are used. Because I am not a regular viewer of the show, and I do not speak Arabic, I have used recommendations from viewers and online blogs to decide which translated shows are the most useful in this criticism. The shows I reviewed all had a huge response in the Egyptian society, especially amongst conservatives. I start by discussing patterns of the use of comic frame as critique within an emerging democracy. Then I move on to how the comic frame is used to speak for the oppressed in Egyptian society. I conclude this section by discussing how Youssef’s rhetorical choices in his coverage of the conflicting views of the Muslim religion take an interesting but necessary path.

**A Comic Critique of an Emerging Democracy**

The success of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution transformed Egypt’s government from a dictatorship to a democracy. Since 1952, repressive leaders silenced Egyptian citizens (Reuters, 2011). For the first time in 60 years, Egyptian citizens have more control over their country. With this control, the Egyptians elected Mohamed Morsi as president in June 2012. Of course, as many who live in a democracy know, just because citizens choose their leader, this does not mean everyone will be happy with the choice. Youssef offers a glimpse of these types of new democratic struggles with one theme prominent throughout the episodes: the use of the comic frame to present the struggles of an emerging democracy. He uses the comic frame to confront and gain advantage within Egyptian politics. According to Orbe’s (1998) framework, these techniques fit into the aggressive accommodation orientation. With the use of aggressive accommodation, Youssef may be able to change the news media and politics in Egypt.
One major aspect of Egyptian society Youssef hopes to change is exaggeration in the news media. On Nov. 30, 2012 (Radwan, 2012d), Youssef tackles the conservative news media’s coverage of Egypt’s transition to a democracy. He introduces the segment by talking about how proud he is of Egypt for becoming a democracy. He goes on to say how great everything will be in the nation now that democracy has graced Egypt with its presence. Then he cuts to other news media, to the current situation in Egypt by saying things like, “Egypt is a catastrophe!” and “Egypt is dying!” After these clips, he sarcastically asks, “Catastrophe?!?” mocking the exaggeration of the news media. Attacks on exaggeration in the news media can be found in many other episodes of Al Bernameg. On Dec. 7, 2012 (Radwan, 2012e), Youssef shows a group of news media clips where each reporter increases their guess on the size of protesters at Cairo University earlier in the week. The guesses range from 2 million to 10 million protestors. Youssef interrupts these clips as an auctioneer, asking the audience if they are willing to go higher. With these actions, he is not directly attacking the reporters. Instead, he is trying to educate the reporters by pointing out their inconsistencies, in hopes that by pointing them out they will decrease. In their research on The Daily Show, Painter and Hodges (2010) found that these types of news media criticisms hold media accountable and encourage reform amongst other journalists. As an “accountability tool,” comic journalists such as Stewart and Youssef demand that their peers improve their standards so that they can “support the democratic system that has given it [the media] such life” (Painter & Hodges, 2010, p. 273).

Another area in which Youssef encourages improvement is press interviews with President Morsi. Youssef shows the audience that journalists who were asked to interview the president were given less than an hour to prepare for the interview (Radwan, 2012f). “Preparation?” he asks sarcastically. “Spontaneity is nicer.” Despite this small time frame, the journalists managed to come up with some questions. However, as the news clip shows, the president refuses to directly answer questions. Instead, he offers what seems to be a prepared speech about the greatness of Egypt. After 16 minutes, one of the journalists finally interrupts the speech, but Youssef is already frustrated. “All this and still no answer?!” He was not the only commentator upset by the interview. He shows that one conservative commentator was also upset, but for a very different reason. This commentator is mad about the female journalist because, “she was wearing make-up.” The use of the comic frame allows Youssef to confront the news media, but it does not force him to offer commentary on this argument. Rather, the mostly liberal audience forms its own decision on which
argument, the lack of substance or the woman wearing make-up, deserves more attention.

Youssef is not always negative towards conservatives. At times, he appears to be standing up for President Morsi. On Nov. 30, 2012 (Radwan, 2012d), he uses visuals to argue that the president is not a dictator. He shows other dictators, like Hitler, but then brings a fluffy pillow with a photo of President Morsi on it, saying that he is soft and cuddly. Seeming to argue against himself, he then presents clips from the news media that say Morsi is “turning into a monarch” and that he can do “whatever he wants.” As Youssef finally comes to grips with the reality presented in the news, he sarcastically says that the president knows all, so he deserves this power. To prove this point, he shows clips of President Morsi giving a speech, saying, “Today, is the sixth of October and today is also Saturday.” Directly after this clip, Youssef mocks the leader by saying, “Amazing! The president summarized the sixth of October just like that! It’s Saturday! Some of us thought it was Monday, but no, it was Saturday!”

By exploring the absurdity of some of the new leader’s comments, Youssef is questioning the credibility of the Egyptian president. His irony allows the audience to fill in the blanks. They have the choice to side with Youssef or President Morsi, or to choose neither side. In Appendix D of Burke’s *The Grammar of Motives*, he identifies irony as a major trope that plays a “role in the discovery and description of ‘the truth’” (Burke, 1945/1974, p. 503). Irony offers an opportunity to discuss truth by treating none of the competing perspectives as completely true or false. This gives a voice to all perspectives, leaving the audience with a sense of agency that provides them the opportunity to better decide which competing perspective they prefer. Irony encourages the audience to see the complexity and ambiguity of a situation. It promotes a charitable view of different viewpoints. Through the use of irony, Youssef shows the audience that both he and the president may be wrong and asks that they decide for themselves their preferred perspective.

**A Comic Voice for the Oppressed**

Youssef’s style seems to fit comfortably within the comic frame. Partially because he thanks Jon Stewart for inspiring him, Youssef is constantly compared to *The Daily Show* host (Kingsley, 2013; Marx, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2012). However, this comparison is not completely fair. Although they press the limits at times, Stewart and his staff are not asking for a complete overhaul of the U.S. government. Instead, their critiques show that despite the flaws in the U.S. government it can be improved, encouraging “moral democratic possibilities”
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(Waisanen, 2009). Youssef’s show, however, is an immediate response to the development of democracy in result of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution (Hassan, 2011). Now that democracy has arrived in Egypt, Youssef wants more to be done. After watching Al Bernameg, the viewer can see that Youssef has no problem saying he supports the revolution and does not support the current president. For example, in response to threats within the news media that there would be a civil war, Youssef looks at news clips of thousands of protestors against President Morsi and he beats his chest while saying, “We turned out to be pretty damn tough!” This brings in another major theme found throughout the show: Through Al Bernameg, Youssef has become the mouthpiece for today’s Egyptian revolutionaries.

In the Nov. 30, 2012 (Radwan, 2012d) episode of Al Bernameg, Youssef asks, “Did we start a revolution to replace one dictator for another?” He shows clips of news media pundits saying it is only a “temporary dictatorship” and telling the public to be patient. He responds sarcastically, saying, “A lot of beautiful things we experienced were temporary like that.” He then brings up an organization that ran the country for two years who were only supposed to have power for six months. Next he says that the 1952 revolutionary council was only temporary and they stayed around for “only” 60 years. Unsurprisingly, this statement fires up the audience. He shows that the patience the news media demands is one that the Egyptian people have been forced to maintain for too long. He refuses to let “history repeat itself.” Youssef’s assertive accommodation orientation both educates the audience and communicates the oppressed point of view.

While he is a representative of the oppressed Egyptians, Youssef does not shy away from poking fun at some members of the oppressed. In the December 7, 2012 episode (Radwan, 2012e), Youssef shows an interview with some Cairo University protestors during a million-person march. In the interview, one of the protestors mentions that they need, “toiletries...toilets and bathrooms and 100 changes of underpants.” Youssef quickly points out that 100 pairs of underpants are not quite enough for a million-person march. Are “the rest going commando?” he wonders. He takes this underpants comment to another level by showing a “new revolutionary line of underwear” that can be used as a gag, a rock sling, or a banner to express your opinions. “Live freedom in your underwear,” he says. With this ridiculing of self, he moves close to Orbe’s aggressive assimilation orientation of co-cultural theory, but because all of this is done ironically he is actually communicating within the assertive
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accommodation orientation. Within this orientation, communicators aim to educate and express themselves, helping others better understand their culture.

When communicating for the revolutionaries, Youssef uses the word “we” to show his solidarity. In episode four of season two (Radwan, 2012g), he shows a series of attacks on the revolutionaries that accuses them of engaging in sex acts, doing drugs, and drinking alcohol while protesting. Supposedly, witnesses spied evidence of this in some of the protesters’ tents. Youssef is especially interested in one such piece of evidence: condoms. “And you touched that with your hands? Ewww!” he exclaims. He goes on to say that with all of this supposed sex going on, the protesters must have been hungry. Quickly, he cuts to a mash of clips where conservatives are flipping out over what the protesters ate. “Cheese triangles you scum!” one says. Apparently, the conservatives are mad about the protestors’ eating habits. Once again, by merely showing raw footage, Youssef allows the audience to see the flaws in these condemnations.

Of course, Youssef does not represent every oppressed culture in Egypt. He attacks some members of a more conservative revolutionary point of view. On Dec. 15, 2012 (Radwan, 2012g), Youssef shows a clip of a leader of Hazemoon, “a kind of Egyptian tea-party” (The Economist, 2012), saying that this leader is upset that the Egyptian media tried to cover up the Tahrir Square revolution by calling the protestors “thugs” instead of revolutionaries. This speaker wants more perspectives represented in the news media. Youssef seems to agree with this, but then he cuts to the same leader, calling some of the liberal protestors “a group of thugs.” It appears that the revolutionaries are not always innocent after all. Despite his disagreement with this name-calling tactic, Youssef concedes that this speaker is right about the necessity of more perspectives in the news media. To support this view, he shows a graphic that includes all of the “respectable” religion-affiliated news media found in Egypt. For those who could not pick up on his sarcasm, the clips he shows next highlight just how unrespectable some of these channels can be. Even though he started by attacking the conservative revolutionaries, he shows that he agrees with them on some issues. By showing this occasional agreement of Hazemoon’s ideas, he is building connections between different perspectives. Once again, his communication tactics fit into the assertive accommodation orientation.

A (Mostly) Aggressive Voice for Liberal Muslims

While the struggles of a new democracy and the voice of the oppressed are both important themes found in Al Bernameg, one theme found throughout the show highlights a struggle that many other Muslim nations face today. Youssef
uses his show to discuss opposing viewpoints of the Muslim religion. He tackles the predominantly conservative Muslim arguments found in other parts of the Egyptian news media. He stands up to this dominant point of view, explaining the liberal side of the Muslim religion. At times, he is also very careful not to take his perspective too seriously. To communicate this point of view to the dominant culture, Youssef uses aggressive accommodation, assertive accommodation, and aggressive separation to speak for his culture.

Similar to his techniques used to point out problems within the news media, Youssef tends to let news clips speak for the opposing side. In season two, episode three (Radwan, 2012e), he shows a group of protestors saying, “Islam is coming! Islam is coming!” Youssef responds to the clip with a look of confusion. “Did it go somewhere?” he asks. And then a little later, “So the prayer I prayed earlier doesn’t count?” This uncertainty of his own religious habits shows the audience that Youssef is no expert on religion either, providing them with the opportunity to answer the questions on their own. Adding to this uncertainty, Youssef shows protestors who say they are there for God and others who say they are there for President Morsi. He shows that some protestors think the president was kidnapped from a more holy era, an era that seems to link President Morsi with God. Clearly, the connection conservatives have with the president and religion is something Youssef does not support, but he encourages the audience that the conservatives must be nice people because they are religious. However, after showing a group of clips with these religious leaders threatening harm to those who disagree with them, the audience is left to question the motives of the conservative leaders.

When deciding to air a show directly after a march at Cairo University, Youssef introduces the show by explaining the producers’ decision to air the episode despite the turmoil (Radwan, 2012e). In this introduction, he warns the audience that despite the ongoing violence outside the presidential palace, he will not avoid using comedy to discuss some of the events taking place in Egypt. However, he says, “This program isn’t just for laughs. This program documents what happened and what is happening, and maybe after you watch this episode, we can understand what the reason for all this hatred and violence is.” He goes on to criticize Muslims who can carry out harmful acts “with a clear conscience.” He sees the combination of religion and politics as the biggest problem and this has caused people to “mix hatred and religion.” After this serious introduction, the show teases some of the protesters, but then cuts to a female discussing the techniques of the fashion designer who made her dress, showing that perhaps not all of Egypt is wrapped up in this protest controversy.
In the fifth episode of season two (Radwan, 2012i), Youssef again gets serious with his audience. In response to criticism from conservatives in the media, including Sheikh Khalid Abdullah, Youssef warns the audience that he wants to “put an end to this nonsense.” After saying that no satirical show should have to answer to anyone, he explains that because of the sensitivity in Egypt, the show must get serious to explain its satire to those who do not understand. He goes on to attack those in power who think they “hold the keys to heaven” by saying if you curse and bully people you may not be as religious as you think. He also contends that one person’s idea of religion may not be the same as another’s. Insulted by those attacking his religion because he questions those with authority within Islam, he says, “Just like you don’t consider us Muslims, to us, we don’t consider you sheikhs or scholars.” Then he wipes his hands clean of them. These attacks place him in the aggressive separation orientation of co-cultural theory because his goal is no longer about educating the other side or simply gaining advantage for the oppressed, instead he is rejecting the other perspective.

While he is stating what must be said in the segment discussed above, Youssef’s reliance on the comic frame is arguably more effective in uniting people, specifically when he uses sarcasm to encourage the audience to confront the huge struggle between religion and politics in Egyptian society. During the struggle to ratify the constitution (Radwan, 2012h), Youssef shows a clip from a mainstream news channel that discourages viewers from getting their information on the constitution from anywhere else. Youssef finds this especially interesting because, as he reveals by zooming in to the top left corner of the screen, the channel supports the ratification of the constitution. Of course, they do not want the audience to get their information elsewhere, Youssef quips. This constitution, which he says is only supported by one party, “has articles that can be misused in worse ways than the old constitution,” but the government is encouraging Egyptians to say “Yes” in the name of God. He is wondering how only one party can support a document that has such a connection to God. “Unless,” he says, “this constitution has nothing to do with heaven and hell.”

In the end, what Youssef really wants is for all Egyptians to able to live amongst each other peacefully. “Our problem is we don’t love each other,” he says in one episode (Radwan, 2012j), but, as he illustrates with media clips directly after this statement, the Egyptian political discourse is infested with frames of rejection. Youssef mostly uses the comic frame of acceptance to speak for the oppressed through a variety of co-cultural orientations, but none
of these efforts matter if the other sides are not ready to listen. Until these other sides are willing to evaluate their frames, the voice of the oppressed will not be heard, no matter how funny that voice might be.

**Conclusion**

As most of us in a democratic society know, democracy does not mean equality. With inequality comes oppression, and those who face this oppression must find a way to get their voices heard. Like so many other comic journalism shows, *Al Bernameg* is a special space where the voice of the oppressed can be heard. Youssef uses both frames of acceptance and rejection to push against the dominant culture. Co-cultural theory suggests this can be done in nine different ways, depending on what the oppressed views is the best for each scenario. Youssef’s style mostly conforms with either the aggressive and assertive outcome, specifically the aggressive accommodation and assertive accommodation orientations. With the use of aggressive accommodation, Youssef confronts the dominant culture with “the fundamental goal” of transformation within society (Orbe, 1998, p. 17). On the other hand, when using assertive accommodation Youssef “create[s] a cooperative balance between consideration for both co-cultural and dominant groups” (Orbe, 1998, p. 17).

Although Youssef is representing the voice of the oppressed, when he employs the comic frame he also encourages the audience to consider many sides of the issue. Through comic tactics such as irony, Youssef offers viewers a chance to reflect on the issues presented in the news, politics, and other areas of society, so that the viewers can decide for themselves how they feel about the issues. This is especially important for countries like Egypt because the citizens have been left with predominantly one side of the story for almost 60 years. What is perhaps most important about Youssef’s show is how it coincides with the development of democracy in Egypt. In a country fresh out of a revolution, full of competing ideas on how democracy in Egypt should develop, the consideration of a variety of perspectives is especially important.

According to Burke (1959/1984), Youssef should adopt a comic frame of acceptance if he hopes for peace. He calls the comic frame the most humane of all frames. While I agree with Burke’s ideas regarding the comic frame, I do not condemn Youssef’s occasional use of frames of rejection. I find it necessary for him to employ these types of frames because those in charge seem to have so much control over the news media. Specifically, the tragic frame of rejection separates and confronts the powerful, providing the oppressed with temporary
control. When using this frame of rejection, Youssef falls into the aggressive separation co-cultural orientation. While this may not always be the best way to communicate, when the dominant culture demands only their point of view be heard and provides little options for the oppressed, this orientation is the only option.

This research also helps to underscore the importance of the comic journalism style. While comic journalists like Jon Stewart may not be considered activists, the way they hold the news media and politicians accountable could change society. However, Youssef’s work is arguably even more important. Within a society that rarely allows other voices to be heard, Youssef is not only communicating his own liberal standpoint, but he is also encouraging the audience to consider all sides before forming their opinion. He might be just as wrong as the dominant culture, but he wants the audience to decide that for themselves.

**Future research**

Both *Al Bernameg* and Youssef offer many opportunities for future research. An analysis of how the dominant culture responds to Youssef’s show would be interesting because it would provide a chance to look at how different types of co-cultural orientations elicit a certain response. Is the show able to incite change in politics, the media, or society? This analysis could answer this question and help others interested in both comic journalism and communicating for the oppressed better understand which orientations were more effective in gaining the desired response.

I would also like to see research on how *Al Bernameg* is shared throughout the world. While it is available on an Egyptian channel, many viewers watch it on the Internet, through websites like YouTube. How does YouTube or other social media sites play a role in *Al Bernameg*’s effect on society? It is possible that the show is shared within Egyptian society to unite the oppressed culture. The show may also be shared through Facebook and other social media sites to help other cultures see another perspective of the Egyptian struggle. When other cultures that face similar oppression to those found in Egypt see this form of expression, they may also be inspired to find a way to get their voices heard in their own society.

While Youssef serves as the mouthpiece of the oppressed, *Al Bernameg* does not place the oppressed voice above all others. Instead, like other comic journalists, through his show he is trying to encourage the audience to think for themselves. As Youssef told *The New York Times* in an April 2011 article,
“Everybody thinks that he is right. If you think that it is only the Salafis or Ikhwanis or extreme Muslim’s fault, no, it is the liberals’ fault as well. We are as mistaken as everybody else” (Hassan). Youssef’s struggle is not simply about getting his own voice heard. It is about the dominant class listening to the oppressed. This struggle is not unique to Egypt. It is a struggle found in every society. Within it, a little laughter may go a long way.

References


A Comic Revolution


