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# **Egyptian Satirical Graphics on Social Media after the Arab Spring**

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## **Introduction**

The world of politics has long been a central source of inspiration for the creation of satire in the Arab world; in this, political cartoons are the most established type of such satire today. Following the outbreak of the Egyptian Revolution on 25 January 2011, we have witnessed an increase in the number of cartoonists, webcomic designers and amateurs who use specialist software to draw satirical graphics ‘to defy sponsorship’ (Guyer, 2015, 2017) and to entertain the public through ‘light and creative satirical comedy amid hot political events that swept the country after the revolution’ (Sedky, interview, 31 October 2016). These satirical graphics include webcomics, memes, and Graphics Interchange Format (GIF). Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, a rich body of scholarship on the impact of social media technologies on political activism in the context of the uprisings has been published; this is in addition to a large body of research on media, art and political culture, and on the ongoing political transformation in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (see Singerman & Amar, 2006, Fahmy, 2011; Sabry, 2012; Kraidy, 2016; Sabry & Ftouni, 2017; Aouragh, 2017). The use of satirical graphics on social media has received little attention to date and is thus worthy of discussion. In this paper, I explore various forms of satirical graphics that were published online after the Arab Spring. I will show how these graphics incorporate cinema, theatre, religion, western elements and pan-Arabism to express a political view in a creative manner to appeal to a diverse and broad audience. The first part of the paper provides a brief discussion of Arabic/Egyptian satire with specific reference to political cartoons and Egyptian youth activism on social media (specifically Facebook). It will also introduce the concept of satirical graphics and some of its concrete applications. The second part describes the methodology and provides an analysis of the case study.

## **Setting the Scene: Arabic/Egyptian Satire**

The use of humour and satire in the Arab world dates back to the Abbasid’s era (750-1258) (Kishtainy, 1985, p. 25). At the end of the nineteenth century, a move towards the use of political satire expressed in the form of political cartoons took place. The twentieth century then brought with it an increase in the use of political cartoons (Göçek, 1998). In the context of Egypt, Fahmy (2011) gives a detailed account on the history of Egyptian satire between 1800 and early 1900. The following section focuses on political cartoons in Egypt before and after the Arab Spring.

### *Political Cartoons pre and post-Arab Spring Egypt*

A political cartoon is ‘a specific type of political symbol, a drawn image that may include a text within the image’ (Diamond, 2002, p. 252). Cartoons are persuasive messages that ‘frame’ political phenomena by situating the ‘problem’ in question within the context of everyday life and in this way, exploit ‘universal values’ as a means of persuading readers to identify with an image and its intended message’ (Greenberg, 2002, p. 182). Political cartoons contain generic features or a ‘tool kit’ for constructing meaning, such as characters or ‘characterisations, settings, i.e. situations, plot, i.e. narrations, visual metaphor, motive, oppositions’ (Edwards, 1997, p. 10).

Before the advent of the internet, political cartoons were only published in print, mainly in newspapers and magazines and most of the research on Arabic political satire in fact investigates political cartoons (Göçek, 1998; Diamond, 2002; Qassim, 2007). However, with the increasing use of digital media, political cartoons are now also being published electronically in online newspapers and magazines. What is more, they have started to acquire characteristics that did not necessarily exist in traditional print cartoons (often drawn in black and white, focusing on politics of Egypt and the Arab world). Makhoulouf, a cartoonist and comic writer for *Al-Masri Al-yawm*, comments on the change that cartoons have seen after the 25 January Revolution:

Cartoons have witnessed a noticeable change after the revolution by stressing the visual comedy elements more. That is because cartoonists trust that their followers are well aware of the visual comic effects of the cartoons. These changes alongside drawing digital cartoons as well as using innovative techniques are inevitable due to globalisation, social media and smart phones. (Interview, 07 March 2017)

Guyer postulates that ‘cartoonists find creative ways to defy censors’ (2014, online) and that ‘even the tersest political cartoon is an intertextual headache, containing home-grown symbols as well as local, pan-Arab and global culture threads’ (2015, p. 213). The 25 January Revolution led to new ways of critiquing or commenting on social or political situations creatively through a single image. In the context of satirical graphics, this is achieved by merging multimodal signs in one frame (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010, EL-Farahaty, 2018) which involves, for instance, borrowing signs from local Egyptian popular art and/or western elements. Singerman and Amar (2006) highlight this longstanding intertextuality between East and West in Egyptian urban culture:

Today, Cairenes daily, literally, and virtually transcend national boundaries. They surf the internet, become migrants and interact with tourists ... seek refuge from wars or volunteer to fight in them, learn foreign languages and internet technologies ... (Singerman & Amar, 2006, p. 29)

Following the Arab Spring, there was an overall increase in the number of cartoons about everyday life, perhaps due to the availability of platforms on which people were able to express their views without being held responsible for them. Social issues addressed in political cartoons include standards of living, education and sexual harassment. The latter became a grave concern after political turmoil in the streets of big cities such as Cairo after

the Revolution in 2011. Living standards were also criticised frequently, especially as the slogan of the revolution was ‘bread, freedom and social justice’, whereby bread was seen as the symbol for the basic needs of human life. By way of illustration for the creative nature of political cartoons following the Arab Spring, consider figure 1 below, criticising the declining standards of living after the 25 January Revolution.

**<<Insert Figure 1 Here>>**

**Figure 1: Criticising the standards of living in Egypt after the 25 January Revolution**

**Translation:**

**Arrow:** Marie Antoinette

If the poor can't find bread.. Let them eat "Mango".. Eat cake.. Eat whatever they want!! <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/1175671?section=>

In the cartoon, Marie Antoinette’s famous statement<sup>i</sup> (see translation above) is borrowed to criticise the decline of the standards of living in Egypt. The cartoon brings together elements from the western context, that is, the image of Marie Antoinette and the phrase she is said to have uttered during the French Revolution, at a time when the poor were unable to afford bread, to which the queen was oblivious. The cartoonist constructs an analogy between the context of the French Revolution and the Egyptian Revolution by combining the French queen’s image and her statement with elements of Egyptian popular culture using the words of an old Egyptian TV toothpaste advertisement (from the 1970s). The advertisement encourages children to eat whatever they like as long as they clean their teeth afterwards: ‘They (children) can eat sweets, they can eat gateau<sup>ii</sup>, and they can eat all they like’ (Author’s translation). This example indicates that using a pre-existing image in conjunction with a well-known phrase is a feasible tool in the development of internet cartoons.

## **Egyptian Youth Activism on Social Media**

A large body of research has examined the role of information technologies, digital media and social media in the context of the Arab Spring (e.g. Anderson, 2011; Stepanova, 2011; Zayani, 2011; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Sabadello, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013). In Egypt, the impact of social media on cyberactivism was felt long before the Arab Spring, roughly at the beginning of the new century when young people increasingly got involved in political events. This is confirmed by Makhoulouf: ‘breaking barriers and crossing the red lines began years before the 25 January Revolution in the opposition newspapers. In my opinion, art in journalism is considered one of the triggers of this revolution’ (Interview, 07 March 2017) The (co)founders of the two Facebook pages under discussion in this paper also claim that censorship exists. In this regards, Sedky comments:

State censorship exists but we did not face any situations so far. However, we are sometimes harassed by our followers who support state figures or any other important person we criticise. (Interview, 31 October 2016)

Two political groups that emerged were *Kifayah* enough, and the *April 6 Youth Movement*. *Kifayah* was established in 2004; its aim was to unite a number of political parties in Egypt, and to demand ‘the rotation of power’ (Oweidat et al., 2008, p. viii). The *April 6 Youth Movement* was established in 2008, subsequent to the workers’ strike in the city of *Mahalla* in the North West delta region of Egypt. This movement was associated with the youth, who depended significantly on the internet for mobilisation (Korany & El-Mahdi, 2014). Another influential Facebook page, *We are all Khalid Said*<sup>iii</sup>, was established following the death of *Khalid Said*, a young man who was tortured to death by police officers in Alexandria in 2010. His death and the photos of his deformed face captured secretly by his brother in the morgue triggered an outcry across Egyptian society. What started as a page to account for *Said*’s death became a forum for political discussions about Mubarak’s regime (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). In fact, to this day, the internet presents a significant platform for these groups to express their political views and to reach out to other young people.

Cyberactivism thus greatly increased during and after the Arab Spring, and was witnessed by activists around the world (Howard & Hussain, 2013). According to World Bank<sup>iv</sup> figures, there was a sharp increase in the number of internet users in Post-Arab Spring Egypt: rising from 13.6 percent of the population in 2006 to 25.6 percent in 2011, with a further increase to 35.9 percent in 2015. Although actual figures are difficult to determine, these numbers indicate increased social media engagement and participation of Egyptians from different social backgrounds and age groups. It is, however, obvious – at least from the websites analysed in this paper – that it was especially after the 25 January Revolution that the youth gained more access to the internet and began to actively participate in online activities. As a result, the presence of commonly known forms of political satire such as political cartoons and graffiti increased (see Boraie, 2012; Grondahl, 2013; Hamdy, 2014). The use of technology in conjunction with increased channels for self-publishing and self-funding or crowd-sourcing made it easier for cartoonists, webcomic writers and amateurs to publish their work and sell it online, as they have access to a wider audience and are subject to fewer constraints from publishers and/or the government. With this new phase, innovative forms of satirical graphics published online emerged, taking on the form of webcomics, memes, and GIFs. As a result, more official sites containing these – such as the sites being discussed here – were created and, in turn, facilitated access for a broader variety of users. Gawish mentions that he wanted the webpage to be ‘a platform for people to freely express their views and ideas, more than the webcomic writers themselves’ (Interview, 23 February 2017).

### **Emerging Concepts of Political Satire in Post Arab Spring Egypt**

Since the Arab Spring, social media also provided a venue for political satire in Egypt ‘not only because of the avalanche of political jokes that it has generated but because of the very structure and instant dissemination of the jokes themselves’ (Salem & Taira, 2012). Khatib (2012) offers a critical analysis of the role the visual plays in political struggles. Høigilt (2017) analyses adult comics that ‘present a damning critique of Egypt’s authoritarian order, as well as of the marginalization of women and broader gender dynamics in Egyptian society’ (Korany & El-Mahdi, 2014, p.111). This paper focuses on mapping Egyptian political satire

and advancing its terminology. In the following subsections, I will introduce the concepts of webcomics, memes, and GIFs. I have chosen titles for the proposed typology of satirical graphics based on their common definition in the literature, despite the lack of agreement when labelling memes and GIFs.

### ***Introducing (Web)comics***

Comics are a type of political satire which ‘may also point fingers at those subject to power in an attempt to make readers cope with the tragic events unfolding around them’ (Willems, 2011, p.16). Douglas and Malt-Douglas (1994) examine Arabic comic strips produced and published in Egypt and various parts of the Middle East and discusses in depth some of the relevant topics featuring in the comics, including anti-imperialism, pan-Arabism and corruption. In Egypt, it was not until the early 2000s that adult comics came to be circulated (Ghaibeh, 2015, p. 324). Like cartoons, comics in Egypt provide ‘a forum for ideas in a realm separate from the highly regulated sphere of journalism’ (Guyer, 2017, online). Adult comics emerged as ‘a channel for youth to express subversive, antipatriarchal views that were indicative of the revolutionary process in 2011’ (Høigilt, 2017, p. 113). In 2008, the graphic novel *Metro* was banned in Egypt, and then reprinted in 2013. The adult comic *Tok Tok* was first published in 2011 (Høigilt, 2017). In 2015, a publishing house for comics was established, and the first comic festival took place in Cairo. Elwarka/the paper, according to Gawish (Interview, 23 February 2017) was established to present something like ‘the western memes in an Egyptian style’. The focus then changed to ‘drawing webcomics of real Egyptian characters to discuss matters that concern public opinion’ (Interview, 23 February 2017).

### ***Introducing the concept of the meme***

For internet users, a meme is ‘a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language “move” or some other unit of cultural “stuff”’ (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 202). Memes generally include, among other things, popular tunes, catchphrases, clothing fashions, architectural styles, ways of doing things, icons, and jingles (ibid., p.199) They are still images that consist of either a photo plus a text, a photo plus a text box, or an illustration plus a text (Callagher, 2017, online). As a concept, memes are not new, but their use on the internet in the context of the Egyptian revolution is new. Memes, as conceived in this article, are still images with text.

During the 25 January Revolution and due to the unprecedented access to technology and the internet, online users in Egypt and the Arab world used memes to express their ideas by leaving behind the constraints of political satire in mainstream media outlets. Nevertheless, memes used by the young people of Egypt are not just copies of western memes; rather, they are created and shaped by Egypt’s socio-political situation and by culture-specific elements derived from art, cinema, and theatre. Followers of a social media page are therefore both, ‘the creators and recipients of this content. They are the judges of what garners popularity and what doesn’t, what becomes part of this collectively curated cultural exhibition and what doesn’t’ (Iskandar, 2014, online).

## ***Introducing GIFs***

The Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) is ‘a form of web-based graphics which contain a series of frames. These frames can be used to create graphics in the form of looped moving images’ (Gursimesk, 2016, p. 330). Today a GIF is ‘a short, silent, looping, untitled moving image, surrounded by a text and other media, shared usually as a form of identity making’ (Newman, 2016, p. 1). GIFs are ‘examples of vernacular creativity among groups of users with shared interests and reference points’ (ibid.). Egyptian users of GIFs often manipulate televised content from films, plays or other performances that are popular and can be easily recognised by the public. These are usually funny and memorable scenes based on the film’s main character. GIFs introduced by *Asa7be* (my friend) *Sarcasm Society*, for example, have frequently made use of local symbols, religious elements, pan-Arab Spring aspects and western elements. All these contribute to the multimodal (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) and paratextual layers of information (Genette & Maclean, 1991) presented in a GIF that aims to criticise ongoing political issues in a humorous way. Sedky (Interview, 31 October 2016) states that ‘GIFs are one type of comics we use. A GIF consists of more than one frame, and it needs to be strictly following the scenario of the original film and adapting it to situation being criticised’. The aim of a GIF containing these elements is to reach out to a wider audience, particularly to young people: ‘content users make use of the GIF literacy to use them appropriately in fitting contexts as reactions, appropriation, humour or commentary’ (Gursimesk, 2016, p. 330). After the outbreak of the 25 January Revolution, ‘these multimodal vernacular design practices’ (ibid., p. 331) became a common way of expression and an effective means of political satire.

## **Method and Data**

The paper undertakes a qualitative analysis of different forms of satirical graphics published on Facebook after the 25 January Revolution in two ways: by investigating a sample of data and by enhancing this investigation with detailed content gathered in interviews with the (co)founders of two Facebook pages:

(1) *Asa7be Sarcasm Society*: <https://www.facebook.com/asa7bess/>

This page was co-founded by Shady Sedky and Ahmed Abdel Aziz in 2012. According to Sedky, this page is the fourth biggest comic page in the world (Interview, 31 October 2016). It is followed by over 14 million people as of September 2018.

(2) *Islam Gawish’s Elwarka/The Paper*: <https://www.facebook.com/Gawish.Elwarka/>

Islam Gawish, a cartoonist and the founder of the Facebook page *Elwarka/The Paper*, is one of most well-known comic writers in Egypt. The page was established in January 2014, and as of September 2018 had over two and a half million followers. Webcomic writers working with Gawish are both professionals and amateurs whose age ranges between 20 to 35.<sup>v</sup>

I chose to use Facebook pages as opposed to other social media outlets because images are also more easily available and accessible on Facebook. Although featuring some political

content, both pages are not categorised as political pages as both of them publish content on current everyday social issues.

### ***Data***

The data collection process followed a ‘convenience sampling’ or ‘availability sample’ (Mutchnick and Berg 1996; Berg, 2001) in the sense that the data was collected from two open access Facebook pages that are followed by a large number of people from different age groups (as per information given in the interviews). These two pages contain a category of political satire that did not exist before the Arab Spring, so were of particular interest to this study. More specifically, the choice of material is based on the following criteria: copyright, accessibility, relevance to the typology of satirical graphics investigated in this paper.

The data comprises of 500 images published between January 2012 and January 2015, a time during which Egypt underwent significant political changes. As the two pages are not solely devoted to political content, screening the images was based on searching the images during this specific time frame and collecting any relevant image that covers political content. These images were then categorised based on themes that characterised the political scene at the time. The images are created by members of each group and then published by the page’s administrators.

### ***Interviews***

The data analysis is complemented with detailed information collected in ‘standardised interviews’ (Berg, 2001:69) which are ‘designed to elicit information using a set of predetermined questions that are expected to elicit the subjects’ thoughts, opinions, and attitudes about study-related issues’ (ibid.). Within a standardised interview, according to Babbie (1995) and Berg (2001), the interviewees respond to an identical set of predetermined questions that are written in clear and comprehensible Modern Standard Arabic. The interviewees are the founders and co-founders of the two Facebook pages: Shady Sedky, co-founder of *Asa7be Sarcasm Society* (31 October 2016), and Islam Gawish, founder of the comic page *Elwarka/the Paper* (23 February 2017).<sup>vi</sup>

Each interview was about 30 minutes long, and covered a set of 13 open-ended logically sequenced questions (Berg, 2001) that were thematically chosen to cover the main focus of the study. The main topics are: (i) personal information/background; (ii) the Facebook pages (e.g. purpose of establishing the pages, number and age of followers, contributors); (iii) process of designing the satirical graphics; (iv) their influence on people’s political awareness; and (v) concerns over censorship. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, and then transcribed and translated into English. In the following section, illustrative examples about the different concepts of political satire introduced earlier in the paper will be provided in the case study analysis. This will be supported by the information collected in the interviews.

### **Analysis of the case study**

The satirical graphics will be discussed in light of innovative approaches to the levels of form and content, which have the aim to transfer an effective political message and in light of



general themes and subthemes: (1) failure of the 25 January Revolution (webcomics, figure 2); (2) clash between generations in regard to the understanding of the concept of revolution (Memes, figure 3); (3) Egyptian distrust in the forensics (GIFs, figure 4); (4) the unprofessional role of the media (GIFs, figure 5). The analysis will uncover socio-cultural elements embedded in each category. This, in conjunction with the information provided in the interviews, will support the argument that these multimodal images<sup>vii</sup> are making innovative references to plays, films as well as use western elements and pan-Arabism.

### ***Webcomics and Failure of the 25 January Revolution***

Online webcomics have attracted a larger readership and more followers after the 25 January Revolution. In this regard, Gawish asserts that ‘this comic page was established amid hot events that swept the Egyptian political scene at the time so Gawish wanted ‘people to follow the webcomics as much as they follow and watch comedy shows.’

With this, Gawish expresses a view held by the many Egyptians, particularly among the younger generation, the failure of the 25 January Egyptian Revolution presented in the following webcomic (figure 2):

**<<Insert Figure 2 Here>>**

**Figure 2: Failure of the 25 January Revolution in Egypt**

#### **Translation:**

##### **2011**

This time.. we will not leave it to anybody

##### **2012**

This time.. we will not leave it anybody

##### **2013**

This time.. we will not leave it to anybod

##### **Now**

This time.. we were screwed up (author’s translation)

The webcomic shows the supporters of the 25 January Revolution between 2011 and 2015 (the time of the publication of this webcomic). Until the very end, people were hopeful that the revolution would succeed despite the difficulties the protesters encountered. The number of people in support of the revolution was affected, and, for various reasons, fewer people participated in the events: some simply gave up, others had to earn a living; the media effect increased; imprisonment became a looming threat; and when some of the main figures of the revolution withdrew from the activities, many followed suit. As a result, hardly any pro-Revolution activists remained. Due to the complex changes and developments Egypt witnessed over the course of these four years, almost every supporter of the revolution now thinks that there has never been a revolution and that Egypt is back to the old system that was in place before the 25 January Revolution. The webcomic shows that the number of demonstrators kept diminishing – perhaps this indicates that people lost hope and lost track of their political demands/aspirations with the passage of time.

### *Memes and the Clash of Generations*

Iconic western public figures such as Barack Obama, Jackie Chan, and Yao Ming have become famous internet memes. One example of the use of these icons in a meme is given in figure 3: Yao Ming meme and the clash between generations in Egypt.

<< Insert Figure 3 Here >>

**Figure 3: Yao Ming meme and the clash between generations in Egypt**

#### **Translation:**

**1** (top right): Hosni Mubarak is the reason behind what we experience nowadays

**2** (top left): **finally old people started to understand**

**3** (bottom right): He should have burnt them along with the square three years ago. We would have been done, then.

**4** (bottom left): (Sa'ad Zaghlool): **no hope** (author's translation)

The meme shows a scene often found in Egypt where people meet in cafes to socialise and discuss political matters. The image refers to the failure of Egyptian society to change, and to their misunderstanding of what the 25 January Revolution was about. It shows a conversation between two elderly men that is being listened to by two young people. The old men blame *Mubarak* for the political and social problems the people of Egypt are experiencing after the 25 January Revolution. The two younger men are listening (one of them is a meme for the Chinese basketball player *Yao Ming*), thinking that 'old people finally started to understand' that Mubarak is the reason behind the turmoil and the unstable situation. However, the old men (see bottom of the image) exclaim that 'Mubarak should have set fire in the demonstrators and the Tahrir square'. In other words, they did not want the events that caused the current situation to take place at all. One of the young men's faces has been replaced with the face of *Sa'ad Zaghlool*, an Egyptian political figure who led the Egyptian Revolution against the English occupation in 1919 and who was Prime Minister of Egypt following the revolution. *Zaghlool* is famous for his saying '*mafeesh faydah*' ('no hope') which continues to be used these days as an ironic comment on the lack of hope for any real democratic change. The second and fourth comments align with the *Yao Ming* meme, which is based on a photograph of the player captured at a post-game press conference in May 2009. The meme is typically used as a reaction to convey a dismissive attitude towards someone else's input in online discussions<sup>viii</sup>. It highlights the impatience of the population, and that many were seeking stability at the expense of democracy or change. It therefore reflects a conflict in opinion between Egypt's older and younger generations in regard to the country's political situation.

By choosing this meme, a cynical attitude towards the opinions voiced by the elderly men – and in extension perhaps towards Egypt's older generation – is expressed, which is only emphasised by *Sa'ad Zaghlool*'s sad face. In conjunction, the various aspects of the message, that is, the well-known meme, *Zaghlool*'s face and his famous words 'no hope', form an

interrelationship that expresses a political viewpoint differently to the way it would have been expressed in a traditional cartoon which uses only one or two of the modes described above.

### ***GIFs and Corruption in Egypt***

In this section, one main theme – corruption in Egypt – and a number of subthemes that address some creative elements designers use to write GIFs will be discussed. Corruption of the security forces and Egyptians’ distrust in the forensics are one issue targeted by the creative satirical graphics emerging in the country. Let us consider the death of the Egyptian activist *Shaimaa al-Sabbagh*, for instance, who took part in a protest in January 2015 and was shot. The forensic report suggests that ‘she was very thin. She did not have any percentage of fat. So the small pellets penetrated very easily...’ (Tooba, 2015, online). This narrative is presented in the GIF shown in figure 4:

<< Insert Figure 4 Here >>

**Figure 4: Egyptian distrust in the forensics**

#### **Translation:**

**Top:** The forensic evidence with regards to the shooting of Shayma’ al-Sabagh:

Pellets do not lead to death but it penetrated into her body because she is very skinny.

**Middle:** in a big plastic bag, get me some chocolates, crisps, juices, and possibly some sandwiches if you have

**Bottom:** I am going to a demonstration and I do not want the pellets to penetrate into my body. (author’s translation)

This GIF is borrowed from the Egyptian film ‘*X Large*’ (2011), starring the Egyptian comedian *Ahmed Helmy*. In this film, *Helmy* plays the character *Majdi*, an obese man who is trying to lose weight but is unable to. This has a negative impact on his life, becoming most visible perhaps in his failure to marry the woman he likes. The scene depicted in the GIF takes place during Ramadan, the month of fasting in Islam. *Majdi* is going to drive the girl he loves and her mum to the city of *Sharqiya* in northern Cairo. Under some circumstances, individuals are allowed to break the fast early during Ramadan, for example if an individual is ill or is travelling for a long time. And so in the film, *Majdi* chooses to break his fast because he is travelling and he is diabetic. He approaches a shop keeper to buy snacks and drinks and says: ‘In a big plastic bag, get me some chocolates, crisps, juices, and possibly some sandwiches if you have because I am very hungry’. As the shopkeeper makes gestures of discontent, *Majdi* phones a Christian woman, changing his Muslim name to a Christian name. As Christians do not fast during Ramadan, the character seemingly justifies why he is able to buy food and not fast.

In the GIF based on this film, the narrative represented by the different modes (picture of *Majdi*, same frames and scenario of the film) was borrowed to criticise the killing of the activist *Shaimaa al-Sabbagh* by the police forces, and also to ridicule the forensic evidence which claimed that her death was a result of her being too slim. In the film, the character offers a justification for buying all these snacks: he is going to a demonstration and does not want the pellets to penetrate his body.

### *Pan-Arab Spring elements in GIFs*

Pan-Arabism is not a new concept in Egyptian politics; in fact, Egyptian president *Gamal Abdel-Naser* advocated for it in the 1950s and 1960s already, and actively pursued it through his involvement in conflicts in other Arabic countries such as Yemen, Algeria and Palestine.

After the Egyptian Revolution, amateurs used memorable moments from other revolutions, e.g. Libya, to criticise the status quo in Egypt. One example relates to *Mu'ammur Gadafi's*. His tribal or military outfit and sunglasses have inspired the Egyptian youth to criticise the Egyptian presidents *Mohamed Morsi* and *Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi*; *Sisi*, for instance, was criticised for wearing the same military costume and sunglasses as *Gadafi*. During the Libyan Revolution in 2011, *Gadafi* delivered a speech which was criticised by many; especially when he began to scream, wondering who the rebels are, why they were stirring people in Libya and for whose sake. He asked the rebels: 'Is that it, you people of Benghazi? [...] Who are you?' During his trial, Egypt's ex-president *Mohamed Morsi* was criticised for using similar words when he said to the judge: 'Who are you, oh you man?'. *Morsi* was portrayed pointing his finger and wearing *Gadafi's* infamous brown outfit during his speech in February 2011<sup>ix</sup>. This example brings together similar elements of the Libyan context in one frame: the unforgettable sight of *Gadafi* in his outfit in 2011, as well as the action he took when he pointed his finger at the camera, shouting at his people and asking questions. These same modes were brought to the Egyptian context nearly four year later to show a new, creative way of political satire which people from different ages and backgrounds in Egypt and in the Arab world could relate to, and which they continue to remember to this day.

### *Western elements in GIFs*

Many Egyptian people watch films produced in the West, especially Hollywood films, and they have been inspired to use them as a tool to express political satire. For example, the Egyptian talk show presenter *Tawfiq Okasha* was used by the government as a tool to achieve their agenda by talking in his simple language to the Egyptian people. Although *Okasha* could be perceived as unprofessional in the traditional sense of TV presenting, his use of street language rendered his role highly influential in the political context. Since the outbreak of the 25 January Revolution, *Okasha* continuously raised doubts and attacked many figures of the revolution, believing to be supported by the state. But after a series of major errors that could not be tolerated either by the people or by the government, he announced his retirement (figure 5).

<< Insert Figure 5 Here >>

**Figure 5: Criticising the unprofessional talk show presenters in Egypt**

#### **Translation:**

#### **Top left:**

Tawfik Okasha

declaring that he is retiring from the Media

'I will never change my mind' (author's translation)

The GIF uses a scene from the Hollywood film *The Dictator*, starring Sacha Baron Cohen who plays the character of *General Aladin*. The film criticises the oil-rich (imaginary) Northern African country of *Wadiya*: ‘he is a satirical version of the Saddams and Gaddafis, those tinpot tyrants whose natural cruelty and vanity was nurtured by the west – maintained as allies to keep other states in line, or repurposed as bogeymen to be defeated when the need arose’ (Bradshaw, 2012, online). The scene depicts *Okasha* breaking news on his private channel *Faraeen*, announcing that he will retire and never come back. In real life, the presenter announced this repeatedly over many years but he never did. Signs and English are used in this GIF, and both elements show that the vernacular GIFs engage with international movies that are more accessible to a large number of people in Egypt, especially young people. The GIF, the image of *Okasha* coupled with *Aladin*’s sarcastic comment ‘yeah yeah we are very sad’, reflects the view of many Egyptians who were pleased that *Okasha* had stopped his absurd programme. Quoting from *The Dictator* therefore in fact increases the impact of this GIF, as the TV presenter *Okasha* and the main character of the film display similar personality traits. There is an obvious element of comparison between the character of General *Aladin* and the Egyptian TV presenter, which is brought to the fore by this GIF. As mentioned by Bradshaw (2012, online), *Aladin*’s role will finish when the need arises. The same happened with *Okasha*; he was removed from the political scene when it was obvious that he could not continue. Both characters are comic, satirical and silly: the appeal of *Okasha* lies in his unusual form of entertainment, not in the content of what he is expressing. People watch him because he is unusually odd and peculiar. The same holds for *Aladin*; the film does not offer much in regard to the depth of his thinking, but viewers enjoy watching him because of his satirical character.

#### *Religious elements in GIFs*

Satire of the sacred cows of the classical Arabic language has existed in Egypt before the revolution. In his plays, *Adel Imam*, a popular and well-known Egyptian actor, is known to criticise Muslim imamas in Egypt for their use of classical Arabic whenever everybody else speaks either Egyptian colloquial Arabic or sometimes Modern Standard Arabic, or a mix of both. In one of his plays, *El-wad Sayyed El-shaghal/Sayyed*, the servant, he refers to a statement uttered by the *Quraish* (a tribe in Mecca) masters rejecting followers of Prophet Muhammad and expressing their fear of spreading Islam, as it risks their trade and threatens their idols: ‘they follow a new religion, what will we do now’. In the play, a matchmaker who appears in the religious dress worn by imams and members of *Azhar* (a well-known Islamic institution in Egypt) speaks exclusively in classical Arabic. As a result, the character *Sayyed* reacts sarcastically about the way the matchmaker speaks by referring to the statement uttered by a leading figure of the *Quraish*, as described above. These satirical elements come to the fore again after the revolution as can be seen in figure 6:

<< Insert Figure 6 Here >>

**Figure 6: Criticising the selling of the statue of Sisi on the anniversary of the revolution**

**Translation:**

**Top:**

A statue for *Sisi*, ten Egyptian pounds each

**Bottom:**

They follow a new religion, what will we do now? (author's translation)

The GIF criticises the fact that Egyptian children are selling a statue of *Sisi* in Tahrir Square for ten Egyptian pounds on the third anniversary of the 25 January Revolution. Amir of *Shrouk News* (2014, online) writes: The statue is 'a small doll for general Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, Minister of Defence and Military Production, in his military uniform' (author's translation). The GIF thus combines elements of satire from *Adel Imam's* play with the comparison of the *Sisi* doll to pre-Islam idols. It is loaded with covert messages about people's love to *Sisi* in conjunction with religious elements about the illegitimacy of carrying idols, as stipulated in the creed of Islam. By borrowing a theatrical scene from the comedian *Adel Imam*, this implicit message is made entertaining and self-explanatory.

### **Final remarks**

Webcomic writers and amateurs have found their platforms of dissent virtually, a new trend that did not exist in Egypt before the 25 January Revolution. The interviews with the founders and co-founders of the two Facebook pages under discussion have revealed relevant information about the motives for publishing such images, participants who create them and the process of creating them. Both pages comment on a daily basis on the changes in Egyptian politics in an entertaining manner. This new trend has now been widely accepted and is accessed by a large number of Egyptians. Young people criticising current local affairs know they are being monitored by the state but they defy censorship. By doing so, these youth go against the current and challenge the traditional beliefs about the duties of the ruled towards the ruler. In the past, it was indeed difficult, if not impossible, to publish a cartoon criticising an Egyptian president, while it was normal to praise the same president in different ways. Following the Egyptian Revolution, however, people can now express how they feel about their president or their government, and others can react by commenting on and sharing these thoughts. This was not the case before the establishment of activist groups such as *Kifayah* and the *April 6 Youth Movement*; state criticism of the government was not as obvious and took place behind closed doors, in cafes, or, in rare cases, in the form of a movie or a play such as the ones starring the Egyptian actor *Adel Imam*.

The sample of webcomics and GIFs analysed in this paper presented creative images that merge modes and use local, western or pan-Arab socio-cultural elements. When asked about the use of these cinema or theatre scenes, Sedky (Interview, 31 October 2016) said: 'they are more appealing to the public than normal traditional cartoons as they can relate to them easily'. Also, Gawish chooses the heroes of his comics from normal Egyptian characters that one would think he/she might have met them before.

In summary it can be said that this new trend of satirical graphics will continue to exist alongside and compete with the traditional types of political satire such as political cartoons. And although it might be ambiguous to call these innovative images cartoons, they are clearly different from traditional, professional cartoons. In this context, Makhlof commented that digital satirical graphics 'are sometimes mistakenly known as 'webcomics' and they should

be differentiated from cartoons. This is our role as artists to try to make people aware about these different forms' (Interview, 07 March 2017). The huge number of images published daily might therefore pave the way for a new era in which these forms will become established forms of political satire, and will possibly be merged with political cartoons. One could argue about the sustainability of these emerging forms of political satire: they came to the fore after the Arab Spring due to controversial and complex events witnessed on the streets of Egypt until 2014, after which their development and spread slowed down significantly. And yet, we might witness their re-emergence, should major incidents and changes happen on the political scene. One example for this is the heated debate about the transfer of the two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia. Given this small scale study, a useful avenue for future research is to conduct a bigger study analysing the content published on these two websites since 2015 - in the context of the new political situation - and see if there have been any changes and how satirical graphics have developed over that period of time. Another possible future endeavour is to conduct a reception study of these digital forms of political humour in comparison to the reception of traditional political cartoons.

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<sup>i</sup> Queen Marie Antoinette ‘the queen of France during the French Revolution. As the story goes, it was the queen’s response upon being told that her starving peasant subjects had no bread. Because cake is more expensive than bread, the anecdote has been cited as an example of Marie-Antoinette’s obliviousness to the conditions and daily lives of ordinary people.

<sup>ii</sup> Full lyrics of the advertisement are available in Arabic here: <https://www.nilemotors.net/Nile/153378-a.html>

<sup>iii</sup> For a full account of this page and its role in mobilising the public for the 25 January Revolution, see Khamis and Vaughn (2012)

<sup>iv</sup> World Bank, Internet users for Egypt [ITNETUSERP2EGY], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis: <<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ITNETUSERP2EGY>> (Accessed January 30, 2017)

<sup>v</sup> For more information about the (co) founders of these two pages, refer to El-Farahaty (2018)

<sup>vi</sup> Excerpts from an interview conducted on 07 March 2017 with the cartoonist and adult comics’ writer Makhlof who publishes for *Al-Masri Al-yawm* newspaper will also be referenced in this paper. For more information about Makhlof, refer to El-Farahaty (2018, section 5.2)

<sup>vii</sup> For a multimodal analysis of these images see El-Farahaty, 2018.

<sup>viii</sup> Full lyrics of the advertisement in Arabic are available here: <<https://www.nilemotors.net/Nile/153378-a.html>>

<sup>ix</sup> This photo can be accessed here: <https://mz-mz.net/242459/>



Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Criticising the standards of living in Egypt after the 25 January Revolution



Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Failure of the 25 January Revolution in Egypt



Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Yao Ming meme and the clash between generations in Egypt



Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Egyptian distrust in the forensics



Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Criticising the unprofessional talk show presenters in Egypt



Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Criticising the selling of the statue of Sisi on the anniversary of the revolution