Between humour and uproar: satire and the view of the west in the media of the Arab-Muslim world

José Maria Perceval

■ *The author describes the development of the public communication arena in the Arab-Muslim world and the incidence of humour and satire in the broadcasting media. Firstly, he notes the differences between Arab-Muslim humour of oriental tradition and western humour. He centres his analysis on the humorists and series broadcast during Ramadan, criticising social customs belonging to the legacy of an agrarian society, partriarchalism and religious hypocrisy. In addition to this, a field of criticism is also developed of the west between reflection and insult, creating a complex image of an "other" that is both appealing and dangerous for the Arab-Muslim identity.*

José Maria Perceval
Lecturer at the Faculty of Communication Science of UAB

1. Introduction

The Tunisian minister of public works is visiting his Egyptian counterpart and admiring the richness of his apartment. "Come to the window and look," says the Egyptian minister. "You see the motorway coming into Cairo? There should be two motorways". Months later, the Egyptian minister for public works is visiting his Tunisian counterpart and admiring the fatuous sumptuousness of his apartment. "Come to the window and look," says the Tunisian minister. Over there, there should be two motorways that would make it easier to enter the Tunisian capital. There isn't even one".

   This is an old joke, already used in the so-called real socia-lism countries of Eastern Europe and still valid, for example, in the Ukraine or the Asian republics of the former USSR. The variation, both in these countries and in the Arab-Muslim media system, is that this kind of humour is no longer oral but is gradually entering entertainment programmes on local television channels, radio commentaries, internet blogs, etc. as an example of the appearance of a new public sphere[1] that encourages debate and reflection of the managers of political and social power.[2]

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[1] The most interesting series of studies on this birth of the public sphere in the Arab-Muslim world has been that gathered by EICKELMAN, D. and ANDERSON, J. W. eds. *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. It contains articles by NORTON, A. R. "The new media, civic pluralism and the slowly retreating state", pp. 19-28; EICKELMAN, D. "Communication and control in the Middle East: Publication and its discontents", pp. 29-40; ANDERSON, J. W. "The internet and Islam's new interpreters" pp. 41-56; ARMBRUST, W. "Bourgeois Leisure and Egyptian Media Fantasies." pp. 106-132.

[2] On this modern Arab state, see the work by MARTÍN, G. *El Estado Árabe*, Barcelona: Bellaterra, 1999.

Humour, satirical comment and very often direct insult are linked to information, are their ironic or fun correlate, although, in most cases, learned people forget this. Humour and satire are ambiguous and play with words[3] (and if it is graphic material, with images),[4] they channel a wide range of tensions and trends, leading both to dialogue and violence, resulting in laughter that liberates or insult that excludes, expressing the concerns of an endangered identity or leading to the exclusion of other identities by means of disrespecting or ridiculing certain characteristics considered to be negative. Humour, therefore, is neither positive nor negative per se but due to the content that carries it.

In the case of the Arab-Muslim world we have a huge amount of evidence of the presence of humour and irony in everyday life and as a key element in the communication of people and groups. Most issues are treated with a strong dose of humour and ironic arguments, especially in small business, due to the still well-established custom of haggling.

The problem when analysing this lies in the fact that studies of Arab humour are focused on the forms and practices of a classic type (work on literature and tradition, such as the humoristic genre of Adab[5]) or anthropological works, not relating this field with that of the media or reducing it exclusively to oral communication, where evidently they are a fundamental factor but not the only one. Together with this absence, or due to it, there is a perverse ignorance on the part of certain authors, such as that displayed recently by the writer Martin Amis, who invent a supposed characteristic of ethnocentric western leisure self-criticism and contrast this to an even more supposed absence of humour in eastern culture.

Can we analyse this space of humour and insult, of direct exclamation and citizen comment in the Arab world? Yes, although it is very difficult to grasp. The new media panorama offers us this possibility, eliminating mediations and filters of the professionals that used to manage, channel and censor opinion. The advantage, or danger, depending on how you look at it, of the new media system is how these comments emerge immediately in the new public sphere where the action-reaction effect can be carried out thanks to comments from Internet users. Humour and insult, previously reduced to oral situations, can appear in an audiovisual programme with the participation of the public or directly in blogs, or in comments to blogs permitted by the internet tool, due to the figure of the reader-writer, "the user who reads and answers the article he or she has read by contributing a reflection that constructs a new text".[6] Jokes circulate in text messages or are sold on CDs in markets throughout the Arab-Islamic world, almost all of a classic tradition but with new stories introduced or new versions of the same stories with themes such as the Iraqi war or the problem of Palestine, with the reflective stories of the wicked hero Doha or the idiocies of the emblematic Mullah Nasrudin,[7] representative protagonists by antonomasia of jokes in the Arab world.

A radical change in the field of public opinion has resulted from the emergence of a new, constantly active media system that goes beyond the classic media, either press or broadcasting, fossilised in already endangered models which have had to adapt given the dynamism of the new broadcasting media, led by the presence of Al-Jazeera and other satellite channels. The counterpart of traditional broadcast channels has been the investment in humour and entertainment programmes that makes up for the fact that it is impossible to offer information as attractive or dangerous as that of the news channels. The increase in information

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3   On synecdoche, see TODOROV, T. *Investigaciones retóricas*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Buenos Aires, 1970.

4   MORIN, V. "El dibujo humorístico". In Various Authors: *Análisis de las imágenes*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1972, pp.137-187.

5   SCHMIDT, J. J. *Li livre de l'humour arabe*. París: Sindbad, 2005.

6   PERCEVAL, J. M., SIMELIO, N. "La narratividad digital ante la lecto-escritura esquizofrénica: un desplazamiento hermenéutico", Huesca: Congreso de Periodismo digital de Huesca, 2006.

7   SHAH, I. *Las ocurrencias del increíble Mulá Nasrudin*, Barcelona: Paidós, 2000.

offered by satellite is therefore coordinated with an increase in fiction (TV series) and a reflective derivation (debates on social issues) with greater participation and involvement on the part of users (audience surveys, rehearsals with direct or indirect participation). At the same time, the news broadcast by Al-Jazeera is immediately reflected online in the Arab blogsphere, or on new media such as text messages, showing that they have become the object of everyday conversation.

Everything is discussed in the Arab-Muslim world. The lack of information that was evident just one decade ago, the possibility of the Saudi Arabian government at that time to hide the start of the Gulf War for three days, no longer exists. And, within this whole, a common novel Arab-Muslim identity has been constructed that involves the parallel presence of an imaginary construct: the west of the Arab-Muslim media, the west (or rather, the western or westernised Arab) of comedy programmes and the terrible west or that satirised by blogs or text messages, that constitute the other face of the 'Orientalist' mirror dissected by Professor Edward Said in his classic book.[8]

Now we have two views, both 'western' and interconnected, by the way: the construction from orient to occident, always present,[9] but which has been rebuilt very aggressively and with new nuances since the attack on the twin towers;[10] a view that is perceived as bothersome and uncomfortable in the Arab-Muslim world. And, at the same time, in line with this, the view of the west in the Arab-Muslim world formed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and successive Gulf Wars[11] given by the new Arab-Muslim media. The disappearance of nuances, the unification of stereotypes and the adoption of discrediting clichés have increased considerably.

2. The notion of insult and humour in the eastern Arab-Islamic world: notable differences

Unlike other societies where insult is ritual and ordered by structured codes, in the Arab-Muslim world permissiveness with insult is minimal as it affects the honour of the group even above that of the person (better represented by the notion of ridicule).[12] In narrative terms, the model of humorous stories is in line with the circular story or parabola, more usual in eastern oral discourse, resulting in the short story or joke, than the western lineal story that gave rise to the novel. The parabola is based on a prior presupposition that is demonstrated subsequently throughout the story. It is narration that aims to educate and can mix the serious with the funny, a tragic and satirical description of a certain situation. Even in the modern Arab novel, introduced by westernised intellectual ambiences, this system continues in the small stories inserted in the general text or emerging in comments made by the protagonists. The fable, tale, apologue and joke derive from this system of stories as short stories, all hugely developed in the Arab-Muslim world.

Jokes or short tales are the other side of the educational or religious parabola, of the short educational or proverbial story. The variation in the joke is that the conclusion obtained at the end of the story, although an apparently logical consequence of the presuppositions proposed at the beginning, is grotesque or ridiculous due to the consequences it provokes. Jokes had been limited to the oral world, where they are still impressively vital, but had been reflected little in the public literary world (although this was not the case with transferred series of stories) until comedy programmes

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8   Said, E. *Orientalism* (1969), Catalan translation: *Orientalisme: identitat, negació i violència*, Barcelona: Eumo Editorial, 1991.

9   Said, E. *Covering Islam* (1981), Spanish translation: *Cubriendo el Islam. Cómo los medios de comunicación y los expertos determinan nuestra visión del resto del mundo*, Barcelona: Debate, 2005.

10 Elliot, D. "Terrorists we like and terrorists we don't like." In Martin Lester, P.; Dente Ross, S. *Images that injure: pictorial stereotypes in the media*, Westport: Conn, Praeger, 2003.

11 Slyomovics, S. "Sex, lies, and television: Algerian and Moroccan caricatures of the Gulf war". In Joseph, S.; Slyomovics, S. (ed.), *Women and power in the Middle East*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, pp. 72-98.

12 See the two specials: L'injure, la Société, L'Islam. Une Anthropologie de l'Injure. *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, No. 103-104, June 2004; L'humour dans l'Orient. *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, No. 77-78, October 1996.

were broadcast and there was an explosion of free production on the internet. Now this genre is experiencing full exponential geometric growth.

The presence of this style of eastern humour in the west has been linked with a long tradition of Jewish humour (from Charlie Chaplin to Woody Allen, from Adel Imam or Ahmad Snussi, better known as 'Bziz'[13] to Nabila Ben Youssef in the Arab setting[14]) where the humorist is strongly self-critical (laughs at himself) or gives off a strong social sense (laughs at the society that represses him). Many of these humorists, as Bziz himself, have suffered from cruel political persecution in their home countries and have had to exile themselves on entering the field of political irony.

Contrasting this regenerating humour, and related to the debates required for the internal renewal of society, we find another humour that channels social and ethnic clichés and stereotypes of a strong segregating and excluding nature. Social criticism often walks on the edge of the insulting abyss when dealing with physical defects or those supposedly belonging to a specific group in society. In the Arab world, Moroccans make jokes about Algerians, Lebanese about Syrians and Tunisians about Libyans... In Egypt, the inhabitants of Upper Egypt are portrayed as workmen (also reflected in their particular way of speaking in TV series or humorist monologues); in Saudi Arabia they laugh at the Pakistani immigrants who form the basis of their domestic service... In countries with strong social control, because of this censorship humour results in jokes about weak groups and people (due to their physical defects, their social or ethnic origins) rather than criticism of society, religion or governmental policy which, on the other hand, is expressed in the street and is still oral. The battle between both types of humoristic content is carried out in the new media contexts and the progressive or backward evolution of the new area of Arab-Muslim public opinion will depend to quite a large extent on how this develops.

3. New spaces of public communication for a renewed humour

In the Arab world, the absence of images and theatre has historically concentrated functions in narration that place it between mime and storytelling, between theatrical monologue and clowning, with great complexity and variety. The question of image, and of the absence of image, has been widely covered as a particularity but it is paradoxical that it was Saudi Arabia in 1960 that launched itself into the field of television, breaking all kinds of resistance from religious authorities, to offset the influence of the powerful and dangerous Nasserite radio, 'the voice of the Arabs' (Sawt al-Arab). Once again, now, the presence of anti-Wahhabi TV preachers has led to the appearance of religious programmes on Saudi television, overcoming the latest resistance of religious people to the use of the powerful medium to enter Saudi homes.

All these phenomena, contradictory and controversial, show how television provides a new context in the public sphere in the Arab-Islamic world that was previously limited to readers of newspapers, the most educated and westernised sector of society. This is the fundamental reason for television's permissiveness on the part of neo-traditional religious sectors, i.e. not exactly traditional but re-inventors of tradition in the best sense of Hobswan.

Precisely, radio had had notable influence in the Arab-Muslim world due to the little development of the press which is still at a ratio of 1 to 6 compared with industrialised countries and also due to the bilingual nature of printed communication (in Arabic and English or French), leading to a filter of colonial origin with the spoken language. The success of Egyptian radio station Sawt al-Arab[15] (1952) served as an opening for an area of common opinion in the Arab world with greater depth than the Arabic press.[16] At the same time, radio started a progressive and inevitable destruction of the oral culture on introducing into homes and in the fields, thanks to the transistor, an authorised voice

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13 Talk by Beatriz Soto Aranda, "Marruecos a través del humor: Una aproximación lingüística a la obra de Ahmed Snoussi Bziz", Murcia: Universidad del Mar, 17 May 2006.

14 Programme *Les humoristes* which, from 1989 to 2000, was presented by Alia Kdeih on RMC.MO with a large selection of humorists from the Arab world.

removed from the family and local hierarchies. Currently, radio has become the greatest disseminator of fashions and behaviours, of expressions and ways of talking, of new rhythms and has encouraged a musical syncretism that affects the whole Arab-Muslim world with evident loans between countries but with powerful local figures. Radio started to change by offsetting the language of the Friday sermons with a direct colloquial expression typical of the North American disk jockeys, which it also imitated at the same time as renovating the success of European radio stations between the wars employing dedications and dedicated records. These DJs use a language full of humoristic and ironic twists, with jokes and short stories that often have an effect on social criticism but also deepen social or ethnic stereotypes. The radio has been "guilty" of introducing hip-hop that reaches from Morocco to Palestine, with strong resistance from radical Islamist and Arab nationalist sectors but with evident success among the young. Very interesting in this respect was the congress in 2003 held by the Goethe Institute in Dakar, where the mass media in Senegal were analysed, from radio to local press, and the penetration of external models and the intervention of power.[17] Since the beginning up to the present day, radio has been strongly controlled and censored by the powers that be, its commentators follow very specific instructions and, for this reason, the music field has been the freest, although certain groups are vetoed because their words criticise the system. Rap and its varieties break with the tradition of love songs and introduce social themes, irony and sometimes direct insult of corrupt leaders, false religious and pious people and exploitative entrepreneurs.

For its part, television radically changed the panorama at the time, increasing media influence with its enormous capacity to seduce and, culturally, adopting clearly western models (the appearance of presenters, an unheard of representation of females in many cases, interviewee fashions, the constant presence of western guests and images, advertising for western products in a clearly western context, etc.). The presence of the west increased due to pressure from films broadcast on television (Anglophone or Francophone, depending on the area of colonisation) and to the agency images, absolutely dominated by the west.

The second revolution occurred with the emergence of Arab channels, since the beginning of the eighties, which increased their own production and started to develop the regional market, at the beginning competing weakly with western products.

Their fields of development will be:
- Fictional series
- Comedy series
- News
- Debates
- The appearance of star presenters that can change country due to their use of literary Arabic.

The media situation underwent a radical change in the nineties with the expansion of transmission by satellite. The state-based model has been shattered with the appearance of 124 satellite channels in the Arab world. It was a crucial time in which the war of parabolic antenna reached almost grotesque extremes with quick-witted salesmen offering, at the same time, both the parabolic aerial and its disguise, for a modest price, with, in certain countries, the setting up of police specialised in persecuting and discovering hidden aerials.

Local television broadcast on Hertz frequencies innovated by using a Berlusconi-type stage, a place where there is a constant party. Television channels opened up a particular world, specific, where men and women wear western clothes and women don't cover their faces. Western forms and manners have been constantly introduced, advertising (translated but western in origin) introduces new behaviours and attitudes together with novel products.[18] The powers that be have found a magnificent system for diverting critical

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15 JAMES, L. M. *Whose Voice? Nasser, the Arabs, and "Sawt al-Arab" Radio*, <http://www.tbsjournal.com/James.html>.

16 LABIDI, K. "*The Voice of the Arabs* is Speechless at 50", *The Daily Star,* 7/10/03.

17 TAUREG, M.; WITTMAN, F. (ed.) *Entre tradition orale et nouvelles technologies: où vont les mass média au Sénégal?* Dakar: Enda Tiers Monde, 2005.

content in this new media space by promoting programmes such as 'Big Brother' or 'Fame Academy', which are evidently enjoying success. However, talk shows dealing with family issues, and where insult could find an appropriate stage, have come up against a boundary in the official Puritanism of these regimes. There is no setting of gossip press to provide space for this gossip that, however, is expressed freely in the street on the growing world of show business and its celebrities. The powers that be are, however, increasing investment in this field and in sport, to compete with the satellite news channels that are critical of the hierarchical structure of these regimes.

Internet has been the great revolving platform where a whole series of novel media movements have come about. The world of the Internet has penetrated the East with unusual speed. In 2002, the street Chafic Rcheidat, in Irbid, in the north of Jordan, asked to be entered in the Guinness Book of Records as it had 105 internet cafés in less than one kilometre. The impressive development of blogs in Iran,[19] forming the fourth language in use by blogs according to the *Times* (13 November 2004), or among the top 10 according to Technorati, has led to intervention by the authorities, which accept the phenomenon and try to influence it. President Ahmadineyad himself has a frequently visited blog. On the internet, information alternates with urban gossip, the most incredible rumours and the most radical criticisms, denouncing specific situations and inventing others, irony and jokes together with vulgar insult or terrorist threats. Videos circulate on the Internet of the assassination of hostages, proclamations by the leaders of Al-Qaeda and instructions for making homemade bombs. Also the best texts in favour of peace, dialogue and an end to sectarian violence.

4. The construction of the Western image in news and humorous TV series broadcast during Ramadan: dialogue, criticism, envy, competition and satire

During Ramadan 2006, Saudi Arabia broadcast new social comedies with local plots and criticising aspects of fundamentalism (the comedy *Tash ma Tash* – 'what's happening'– attacked fundamentalist teaching in school) or the segregation of women[20] (criticising the Mahram or male tutor, essential by law for the public activities of any Saudi woman), as well as criticising hypocritical Puritanism, state corruption, police brutality, bureaucracy or traces of patronage-based tribalism that affects Saudi society. This programme, created in 1993 and banned in 1996 and condemned by the Ulema in 2000, by Abdallah al-Sudhan and Nasser al-Qassabi, has the greatest success today (although criticised so much by Islamists and also by opponents, and by Islamists who feel it is tolerated escapism or who criticise its xenophobic portrait of the minorities in the south by ridiculously showing their linguistic defects).

The paradoxical permissiveness employed with this locally produced programme is a consequence of the fall in audience of Saudi public television after the scandal of hiding the invasion of Kuwait that devalued the two official channels and competition with constant presence of Al-Jazeera. In response the Saudi state has also created a sports channel and the news channel Al-Ekhbariya via satellite. Parabolic antennas are spreading in spite of some official fatwas banning them. The unanimous panorama has been broken not only on the political plane but also the religious, as Saudis form a novel audience for the religious programmes of Al-Jazeera, Abu Dhabi TV and Sharjah, some strongly anti-Wahhabi.

But this is a small local example compared with the development of big Syrian and Egyptian productions spreading throughout the Arab-Muslim world with little competition

18 Enisbet, EC., Nisbet, MC., Scheufele, Shanahan, DJ. *Public diplomacy, television news, and Muslim opinion*, Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 2004, 9 (2), 11-37.

19 *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs* by Nasrin Alavi (Soft Skull Press /November 28, 2005).

20 Gresh, A. "Balbutiements de l'opinion publique en Arabie saoudite", *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 2002.

from local studios. The search for an audience of a billion viewers means that their scripts work with a global consensus without excessive localism and bland humour criticising society and the family (like the Moroccan series 'Lalla Fatima' by 2M or 'Andak Amilud' by the popular humorist Fahid). The humoristic themes already covered by Egyptian films[21] have gone on to television: criticism of Puritanism, the patriarchal system[22] and the segregation of women are themes present in these series, coinciding with those of larger audiences.

At the same time, historical themes of confrontation with colonial powers or those affirming identity are becoming stronger. Fundamentalism and terrorism are introduced from a humorous point of view (along the lines of the famous tape starring Adel Imam, al-Irhabi – "the terrorist" - who tells of the adventures of a radical reactionary who, for reasons of security, ends up living with a westernised family).

These series must present a conflict due to the intrinsic nature of the script and the search for themes of social debate, to capture audience, give an interesting list of conflictive social issues in the Arab-Muslim world. Those problems are analysed that concern people in the street, both the hopes and nightmares of the average citizen. Inevitably, they result in a criticism of stagnation and promote greater space for freedom, although this may only be in the small space of the family lounge.[23] They also promote new social and sexual conducts that are conflictive, as is the case of the character Ranad, in the series "Adeel Al-Rouh" ("Soul Mate"), where there is a slight hint of lesbianism, or in the series *72 virgins* presented as a radical critique of fundamentalist terrorism.

But not all series are humorous or critical and socially progressive series. The series *Gargiyan* led to a campaign of bloggers against its strongly racist content. Attacks on Israel have been habitual in these series, as in the case of *Knight without a Horse* which, produced by the Egyptian television channel Dream, is a soap opera taken up by twenty-two channels in 2002, leading to a number of protests by international Jewish organisms due to its vulgar anti-Semitism.[24] A more serious case was the series broadcast on 18 November 2003 (Arabsat, Hotbird and Nile Sat) and denounced by the Simon Wiesenthal centre, given the provocative title of *Al-Shatat* (Diaspora) where the actors played two Jewish characters who carried out a ritual murder on a young Christian at Easter,[25] using his blood afterwards to make *matz*, the unleavened bread for this festival. This fact has coincided with attempts to film the story of the Protocols of Zion by Iran, a Nazi pamphlet published widely in the Arab-Muslim world. In this respect, and in the area of children, the Palestinian government of Mahmud Abbás has attempted to ban, without success, the presence in children's programmes of the channel Al-Aqsa, now dominated by Hamas, of Jihad Mickey who invites children to fight against Israel, against the west and anything western, a true paradox with the character chosen, and the conquering of the world with a terrible simplistic populism in child indoctrination.

In 1990, Saudi Arabia was able to hide from its population for three days the annexing of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein. Today it is not possible to hide news that has happened in the morning for fear of leaving fundamental control in the hands of other channels: the control of interpretation. We have gone from the monopolising of information to attempting to monopolise interpretation, leading to a search for novel images and original statements (a reason for founding the channel Al-Arabiyya and for the active media action of

21 ARMBRUST, W. "The Golden Age before the Golden Age: Commercial Egyptian Cinema before the 1960s", in *Mass Mediations*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

22 ARMBRUST, W. "Transgressing Patriarchy: Sex and Marriage in Egyptian Film" Middle East Report (MERIP) 206 (Spring), 1998, pp. 29-31.

23 ABU-LUGHOD, L. "The objects of soap opera: Egyptian television and the cultural politics of modernity". In: MILLER, D. (ed.) *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local*. Routledge, 1995.

24 MOSAAD, M. "Knight without a Horse: The Lesson is Over Stupid! Racism versus rationality in Egyptian society", Viewpoints/PeaceWatch, December 5, 2002.

25 PERCEVAL, J. M. *Un crimen sin cadáver: el Santo Niño de la Guardia*. Historia 16, 202, pp.44-58, 1993. Available on the Internet, Wikipedia article.

the Saudi princes Salman and Sultan). On the other hand, counter-programming involves putting comedy series or sports programmes on at conflictive times.

To offset the dual front of anti-western Arab nationalists and anti-western Islamic fundamentalists, a dual media network has been formed, interconnected in reality, of Saudi and North American cities, with Lebanese and Egyptian participation in some cases, developing new newspapers (such as Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat), new radio stations and new television channels (the satellite channel corporations ART, MBC, Orbit)[26] and which are now trying to penetrate the internet. This attempt to occupy the field of communication has, however, its limits. In the press, this is due to the little influence of these London elite newspapers. On television, it is due to the excessive ideological intoxication affecting Al-Hurra that has led to profound changes in the structure of Al-Arabiyya in order to be able to maintain a minimal image of independence (on this Saudi channel, although it broadcasts in Dubai).

Al-Jazeera provokes debate on themes that are conflictive and internal to countries comprising its TV audience, such as crimes of honour (in Jordan), ablation (in Sahel and the Horn of Africa), the consumption of certain drugs (controversy of the Yemen *qat*). This means that the television stations from those countries involved react to the statements or reports by Al-Jazeera, leading to an internal movement of debate. Al-Jazeera tries to provoke people in the street and laments, very often publicly, the traditional passiveness of an Arab world that won't wake up (an old and dangerous theme of nationalist Arabism).

Al-Jazeera does not have comedy programmes nor does it cultivate insult. It shows an ambiguous populism particularly through its debate programmes, and a proud nationalism of the Arab past through its historical interpretations. But its effect is immediate on comments in the street that can be followed on the Internet. Anti-western comments and victimism alternate with direct insult and a call to violence against the "invasion of the crusades", "the new Mongols of Hugalu, the destroyer of Baghdad", etc.

5. The world of blogs: anonymous satire and insult

This conglomerate of victimism and desire for revenge is shown much more clearly in the world of blogs, as well as Arab nationalist concerns and irate responses to American or Israeli declarations. The west of the east is the sum of western fears in each field plus the fear of the west brought about by these changes. The war of words is established with clear appropriation by all parties of terms such as democracy, freedom and human rights.

Pro Al-Qaeda feeling has been falsified by the polls, starting with Al-Jazeera itself. Being an absolutely modern phenomenon,[27] of the media and opposed to traditional forces, journalists are the most fascinated by the terrorist environment and those who most increase their data. What is true is that, in media terms, Al-Qaeda is the most powerful and well-known of what it represents.

6. Conclusions: Liberating humour and excluding humour, between socio-political satire and nationalist satire of exaltation or xenophobia

A toaster breaks down in an Egyptian TV series. The smell of burning floods the house. The character, a fundamentalist conservative who is about to go to the mosque for morning prayer, looks at the appliance and smiles at the commotion created: "Western material!" he exclaims. Fundamentalism has won a small battle against the machine that doesn't work but also against a non-traditional way of organising breakfast, against a new way of life that does not respect good tradition "where there are no toasters to break down".

The humour reflects the profound debate that affects the Arab-Muslim world; satire and direct insult are, at the moment, limited to very small areas or freely roam the Internet. Regimes find themselves caught in a fundamental media trap: to increase audience, and therefore the influence of

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26 KRAIDY, M. M. "Arab Satellite Television Between Regionalization and Globalization", *Global Media Journal* 1.1, 2002. ISSN: 1550-7521.

27 GRAY, J. *Al-Qaeda y lo que significa ser moderno*, Barcelona: Paidós, 2004.

their audiovisual channels, they must increase the humour content, the new populist areas of 'dumbed down' TV, including talk shows, overcoming the resistance of the Puritan sectors.

In addition to this diversion, a greater permissiveness can be observed in humorists, also the result of this need to gain audience, which permits criticism that was unthinkable a few years ago on rigid official television channels. Social humour is starting to investigate not only the mother-in-law, the goody-goody hypocrite or patriarchal excess, but is also starting to talk about the 'buddy system' and corruption of state officials, the manipulation of politicians and economic scandals. But, on the other hand, perverse content is introduced of nationalist exaltation, of xenophobic satire and the temptation of falling into a simplification of the West and of what is western is spreading, creating an archetype that would concentrate all evils, diverting criticism of the internal powers that be.

Is Westernism the opposite of Easternism or an animated creation of progressive western academic circles, as claimed by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit?[28] The Arab-Muslim world moves between Arab nationalism, liberal or fundamentalist Islamism and the secular versions of social democracy. The media network contains elements of these three trends where Al-Jazeera is an emblematic example.

The West, some sectors of the West, continues to recreate images of an exotic, confrontational, aggressive East, as show by the peplum 300,[29] close to the clash of civilisations or, simply, subject to its own area of fanaticism. The western world carries this out by devaluing Arab-Muslim media production or, even worse, spreading fears and predictions that almost equate it with a cradle of fanaticism or terrorism.

Humour and uproar are not good companions but go together in this media scenario. In the Arab-Muslim world, the re-creation of the West, be it real or invented, and the reflection of the East, come from a dual interpretation. It's true that lack of understanding and insult are advancing, especially in the world of the internet and the blogsphere but, even in these fields, a public can be seen that maintains two rich and complex views of the West (which they admire or hate, wish to imitate or deeply despise) and the East, which may be established or analysed in more detail but of which they are strongly self-critical.

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28 Buruma, I.; Margalit, A. *Occidentalismo, Breve historia del sentimiento antioccidental*, Barcelona: Península, 2005.

29 Unpublished article by the working group made up of Figuerola, C.; Fornieles, J.; Perceval, J. M.; Tejedor, S., "Comunicación y cómic filmado: La defensa de Occidente en 300 y la construcción mediática de Oriente".