

## **Dissident communication in stand-up comedy: the case of Arab and Muslim countries**

### **A comunicação dissidente na comédia stand-up: o caso dos países árabes e muçulmanos**

Jacques A. Wainberg<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This study is a content analysis of jokes produced and presented by stand-up comedians that in various parts of the world deal with a common theme, the inclusion of the Arab and the Muslim communities in modernity. This kind of humor became popular in many countries of the Middle East and Africa, similar to what is occurring in other continents. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt nowadays tolerate, to some degree, the dissident humor proposed by such humorists. Seeing the Arab and Muslim societies laugh at themselves is a new and startling occurrence, since it breaks with the stereotypical image that they are unable to bear the satire and irony for being dominated by fear and conservatism.*

**Keywords:** *Stand-up comedy; Humor; Joke; Dissidence*

**Resumo:** *Este estudo analisa o conteúdo das piadas produzidas e apresentadas por comediantes stand-up que, em várias partes do mundo, tratam de uma temática comum, a inserção do árabe e do muçulmano na modernidade. Este gênero de humor se difundiu em vários países do Oriente Médio e da África, à semelhança do que ocorre em outros continentes. Os governos de países como Arábia Saudita, Bahrein e Egito toleram hoje em dia, em algum grau, a dissidência proposta por tais humoristas. Ver a sociedade árabe e muçulmana rir de si é ocorrência nova e surpreendente, pois rompe com a imagem estereotipada de que ela é incapaz de suportar a sátira e a ironia por estar dominada pelo medo e o conservadorismo.*

**Palavras-Chave:** *Comédia Stand-Up; Humor; Piada; Dissidência*

<sup>1</sup> Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul. Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil. E-mail: jacqalwa@pucrs.br

Three exceptional ways have been used in the Middle East to face the liberal wave that defies the survival of many authoritative regimes in the region. The first one is civil war, as in what is occurring in Syria since 2011. The second one is the distribution of ‘gifts’ to the people. This measure of ‘buying’ the opposition was successfully applied in Saudi Arabia. This country’s government distributed to the population a total of US\$ 139 billion in benefits between the months of February and April 2011. This attitude made the Day of Wrath, scheduled for March 2011, to fail. The third way is to tolerate, to some extent, the competition of ideas, something that happens through YouTube, Facebook and Twitter in many countries of the region.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the religious establishment makes an effort to shoot down the liberal desire of a significant amount of young people. For that reason, they are opposed to the governmental initiative of sending every year thousands of students to eastern universities<sup>2</sup>. The traditionalists perceive that when they return to the country, many of them vindicate some alteration in the strict patterns of habits of the country. That is, the intercultural experience has been contributing to the social, religious and political dissidence of a part of the youth. There are many signs of this tension in the current Saudi Arabia. A total of 46.18% of the 27 million Saudis were in 2015 below 24 years old. In that year, the average age of their population was 26.8 years old.

Therefore, youth unemployment and their ambition became the reason of a deep political concern of the authorities. An example of that was the dissident campaign promoted through YouTube for the right of Saudi women to drive<sup>3</sup>. The theme of the women’s position in society belongs now to the considerations created in the document “Saudi Vision 2030”. This document produced by the Prince Mohammed bin Salman (known as MBS), the young Secretary of Defense of the country (he is 31 years old), and second in the line of succession, is the strategic plan of Saudi Arabia for the next decades. Finally, the petitions sent to

2 The amount was 199.285 in the academic year of 2012-2013.

3 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowNSH\\_W2r0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowNSH_W2r0)

the authorities of the government requiring liberal measures is another unexpected situation of the new times.

The reactions of the Saudi authorities to these tensions are ambiguous and include, at times, repression. The blogger Hamza Kashgari, for instance, was arrested between 2012 and 2014, after being convicted for apostasy. His crime was to post messages with doubts about the divine nature of Mohammed. The activist for human rights, Muhammad Fahad al-Qathani, on the other hand, was convicted, due to his militancy, to ten years in prison in 2013. The clergy Qassim al-Ghamdi also has defied ultra-orthodoxy when he says that faith allows social interaction among men and women, as well as listening to music and group prayer.

The tension amongst liberals, autocratic governors and their conservative supporters is characterized for what is agreed to be called the Kings dilemma (OTAWWAY; DUNNE, 2007). This concept, created by Samuel Huntington, implies in pointing the doubt that shakes up all absolutist monarch about how democratizing without losing political control over the country<sup>4</sup>. In Egypt, for example, the rebellion at the Tahrir Square resulted in an incapability of Hosny Mubarak's regime to see that their attitude "could corrode, instead of consolidating, his power" (AL-SAYYID, 2013). In case of the former Soviet Union, the experience of communications was a decisive factor to dismantle the communist experience (SHANE, 1995). In the classic case of France in 1789, the king Luis XVI, an enlightened monarch, became a victim of the process of political opening that he himself started.

For the purpose of this study that deals with stand-up comedy as a way that Saudi youngsters found to make social criticism, it is important to emphasize the fact that the relative liberalization of communication in this country, especially on social media (Twitter, Facebook and YouTube), is another example of initiatives created by the authority in order to calm down the population. The use of Twitter by almost three million Saudis (the biggest number on Middle East and 40% of the users of this media on the Arabian world), even though it is surveilled, has allowed

4 See his book 'Political Order in Changing Societies', 1968.

an ample diffusion of ideas and opinions in this country. Almost 32% of the 16.2 million of their internet users are active on Twitter and 18.26% have Facebook accounts. A total of 91% of their youngsters with ages between 18 and 24 years old are Internet users. Saudi Arabia is also the biggest consumer of YouTube in the world, reaching 90 million views every day. That is explained by the fact of having a lack of entertainment. That is, this schedule contributes to break the social boredom that exists in this country. That also happens with the help of videoclips produced by independent journalists<sup>5</sup>.

Among the Saudi dissidents that use new media is, for example, Salman al-Awdah, a moderate critic of the Saudi regime and wahabism. He has 1.6 million followers on Twitter. His book, *Questions of Revolution*, banned by the government, is available online. In the book, the author makes a summary between sources of Salafism and celebrated authors of the west, among them, Karl Marx, Karl Popper and Franz Fanon. Other examples of dissidents are the clergy Salman al-Qudah, a free-thinker televangelist that, in December 2013, had 3.9 million followers, and @Mujtahidd, whose real identity is unknown. In 2012, the Great Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al Shaykh, tried to silence his postings that denounced corruption, financial scandals and extravagance of the royal family. Also highlighted are Walid Abu al-Khayr and Muhammad al-Bijadi, two young human right activists.

Twitter became a preferential way of fight for the Saudi conservatives. The clergy Muhammad al-Arifi is one of the most popular ones. He has seven million followers. His predicament usually includes anti-Semite diatribes against Shia and in favor of women's subjugation. Ayed al-Qarnee, on the other hand (five million followers), usually warns his sympathizers on the danger of western values, specially their materialism.

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlSBqgW5xx0>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7yuRNL37XU>

## Humor and Comedy

In this context of uncertainties and social and political transformation, comedy became a popular vehicle for expression in current Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. A new generation of comedians knew how to use the new platforms of communication to spread their social, cultural and political critique. The Saudi YouTube stars ended up calling the attention of the mass media. This type of celebrification (DRIESSENS, 2012) happens when the ‘microcelebrity’ (TUFEKCI, 2013) conquers their space in the schedule of TV channels thanks to the success he gets on the web (WAINBERG, 2016). Rafinha Bastos is, in Brazil, a clear example of this occurrence.



Saudi comedians are young people educated in foreign universities who brought from abroad the experience of stand-up comedy to their country. Among them is, for example, Khalid Khalifa<sup>6</sup>. Wonho Chung<sup>7</sup>, a Saudi whose father is Korean and mother is Vietnamese, is another stand-up star who lives in Jordan. Many of these comedians are bilingual, were born and/or live abroad, and their success in the West reaches all the Middle East. They break social stereotypes and contribute to the improvement of the collective humor of the region. They express in their monologues, songs and programs many of the ideas that circulate in young environments of the region. They also do a creative synthesis between western and Arabian culture. One example of that is *No*

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wG-7UhQHUrM>

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Pd0hSAYPVo>

*Woman, No Drive*, from Fahd Albutairi<sup>8</sup>, the first Saudi comedian to act professionally in the country. His song is a parody of Bob Marley. The lyrics satirize the argument, common in Saudi Arabia, that the health of women's ovaries would be in danger when a woman drives a car. He says: "No woman, No Drive/Say, Say/ Say I remember when you used to sit/In the family car, but backseat/Ova-ovaries all safe and well/So you can make lots and lots of babies." In another excerpt, he warns women not to touch the steering wheel of the car: "No woman no drive/Hey little sister don't touch that wheel/No woman, no drive" he says, ironically, that "queens do not drive", but they can cook and make "my dinner". The argument against which he sweetly protest is "Your feet is your only carriage". Fahd Albutairi also plays with his hair, long and disheveled, an unusual aesthetic pattern in Saudi Arabia; he ironizes the fear of cursing on TV on his country; denounces racism and makes a social critique when he shows the inauguration of a new Arts Department – in an abandoned and crumbling building.

His show, *La Yekthar Show*<sup>9</sup>, produced to be shared on YouTube, became one of the most popular channels in the country. In its third season, it reached one million subscribers. Another similar show called *3al6ayer Show*<sup>10</sup> turned his mentor, Omar Hussein, another YouTube celebrity. The fact that a good part of the arab and muslim comedian's work on the West explains why the ethnic and religious theme is present in its monologues. Maz Jobrani, an Iranian-american comedian, defines his role as educational. His ironic jokes aim to break ethnic and national stereotypes.

## Theories

It is important to emphasize the fact that comedy is a professional activity that aims, through jokes and sketches, to make people laugh. The

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZMbTFNp4wI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nk7kveb88nQ>

9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2p7j7ipPLc>

10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZn2MvLdYHo>

theme of laughter (usually defined as ‘smiling showing the teeth’) and of what is laughable (ALBERTI, 1999) is object of study of the gelotology (PROVINE, 2001). That is, every comedy implies in humor, although not all the humor implies in comedy.

This concept can be treated as an intra-psychical occurrence, as originally proposed by Freud (1905). That is why it is common the reference to good humor and bad humor of somebody. The state of mind is malleable and can change according to the circumstances<sup>11</sup>. It is worth mentioning that according to the classic definition by Hypocrites, someone’s temper is a result of the balance and the combination of four humors: sanguineous, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic.

Even though there are over one hundred theories that try to explain the properties of the humor, we highlight here the Theory of Benign Violation (MCGRAW; WARREN, 2010) to describe and explain not only humor, but also what happens in comedy<sup>12</sup>. Other relevant theories are, for example, the one that enhances the capacity of humor of presenting an unexpected perspective to a determined situation (Theory of Incongruence, LATTA, 1998; BOYD, 2004); the theory of superiority (the laughter expresses this sensation from the audience); the deprecating humor (the one who bullies and offends the target of the joke); the humor as a defense mechanism, (usually used by weak people to get back at the humiliation suffered from the strong people), adaptation and relief<sup>13</sup>. Linguistic theories on humor were proposed by Victor Raskin (Theory of the Semantic Script of Humor)<sup>14</sup>; by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo (General Theory of Humor)<sup>15</sup>; by I. M. Suslov (Neuro-Computational Theory of Sense of Humor (1992)<sup>16</sup> and by P. Marteson (Ontic-Epistemic Theory of Humor, 2006) among others.

11 See <http://www.oocities.org/hotsprings/Villa/3170/Slavutzky.htm>

12 <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor/>

13 See the main theories on humor in the Chapter 8 of <http://facstaff.uww.edu/shiblesw/humorbook/h8%20theory.html>(Chapter

14 <http://www.ufjf.br/revistagatilho/files/2013/05/O-Humor-e-a-Sem%C3%A2ntica-de-Frames1.pdf>

15 [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0102-44502003000300009](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0102-44502003000300009)

16 <http://arxiv.org/abs/0711.2058>

Because it is a type of benign communication, humor is an efficient social lubricant. Borge Rosenbaum (1909-2003), a pianist, known for his artistic name Victor Borge, a pioneer in stand-up comedy, used to say that “laughter is the smallest distance between two people”<sup>17</sup>. The comedian Ahmed Ahmed says something similar. “We are all the same when we laugh, despite our differences”. Beyond connecting people, laughable sentences also allow the dissident communication of the comedian. According to this interpretation, the laughable occurs when the joke breaks some expectation of the audience and violates a norm or a belief of the audience. It also occurs when the situation of interlocution between the comedian speaker and the listening audience is non-threatening (a *soft* context) and when the perception of these two conditions by the audience occurs simultaneously<sup>18</sup>. This is the case in which the comedian plays with human identities, including his identity. In the case of the comedian defying social and cultural stereotypes, he brings people closer and facilitates the intercultural communication.

The show of the Egyptian Khaled Khalafallah does precisely that. He plays with the difficulty that the westerners have to pronounce his name and with the stereotypes that the Arabs hate. He says, “everyone is nervous around arabs”. In his meetings with western audiences he also makes comparisons about the methods of discipline used in both cultures. Russell Peters, a comedian born in Canada with hindu descendance, also makes ethnic jokes<sup>19</sup>. This content is also typical from what is conventional to call jewish humor<sup>20</sup>.

The benign humor happens when the comedian is not committed with the ‘foul’ practiced or because he is personally distant from the violated norm in his elocution (that happens when the violation does not affect the comedian directly, when it happened a long time ago or because the foul practiced does not appear to be something real). The

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWqFaGwNCMU&list=PLrAlz0YmXl9N0tlhwxwX-vmjiFz2mxBq>

18 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpVt1POOHvQ&nohtml5=False>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83guK7V7\\_5M&nohtml5=False](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=83guK7V7_5M&nohtml5=False)

19 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvlXQ9\\_4lgE&nohtml5=False](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvlXQ9_4lgE&nohtml5=False)

20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5V4zYe23QLg>

violation is also benign when there is an alternative explanation for the norm violated, which allows to turn it acceptable somehow. Sometimes, a malignant violation becomes benign when the observer gets closer to the violated norm. This happens in the 'situational comedies', common in the schedule of TV channels. Sitcoms usually enhance what is wrong in daily occurrences of a person.

According to McGraw and Warren (2010), purely benign situations and purely malignant situations are also not funny. It is the case when someone falls down the stairs and gets hurt. When there is not a break of a certain expectation of how reality should be, there is no humor. The bigger the incongruence, the bigger would be the humor performed. Said in another manner, it is not funny to see someone trying to tickle themselves, but it is funny to see someone trying to tickle another person.

At times, the result of the humoristic elocution surprises the comedian. That happens because he (as any emitter of any message) is not capable of controlling the reception of his elocution. That is, a part of the audience can interpret certain statement as a benign violation while other can treat it as malignant violation. When that happens, the result is the generation of negative emotions in the audience. To surpass this type of impact, the listener shall necessarily understand the violation as being something acceptable (funny). It is the case of a friend that falls down the stairs (breaking the expectation), but doesn't get hurt (something benign). The result is that the humor should be understood as the judgement that a person does of a situation, of their emotional response and their behavior (with the generation of smile and laughter, for example).

According to the thesis of Krichtafovitch (2006), humor is inept to primates and other animals. The laughter is an expression of the joy it causes. As mentioned before, humor is also obtained due to the sensation of superiority that the joke eventually causes on the listener, or due to the sensation of triumph that the person feels when solving an enigma proposed by the joke (relief). The audience reacts better to the joke when they are receptive of it (that is what happens in a stand-up

event). Humor is also a social phenomenon and an intellectual weapon that works as a defense of the weak against the strong. In its “aggression”, the comedian usually uses satire, sarcasm and irony.

## Unexpected

The Saudi case mentioned in this study is laboratorial and works to document these theories. It is a country which social norm limits the usual *laissez-faire* of the costumes of liberal societies. Therefore, considering the Saudi authoritative context, the proliferation of stand-up comedians in the country is an unexpected social phenomenon. What calls our attention is the amount of popular enthusiasm that these comedians bring up to the audience. This is a consequence of the content of programs that, in general, defy themes that are taboo. It is the case, for example, of the Broadcast Show<sup>21</sup>.

Something similar happened in Egypt with the show Al-Bernameg presented by Bassem Youssef. Starting in 2011, this cardiologist turned into a showbiz star after posting on YouTube his satirical postings. His sharp content against the Muslim Brotherhood brought up feelings of sympathy and hatred, simultaneously. Initially, he used his small apartment for the production of The B+ Show. Then, he got the mass audience replicating on Egypt the American format of the American show The Daily Show with John Stewart<sup>22</sup>. Al-Bernameg had his show until 2014, when his show was finished due to political pressure.

The popularization of the stand-up genre<sup>23</sup> has been interpreted as an additional facet of the cultural Americanization of the world (SJÖBOHM, 2008)<sup>24</sup>. In the United States, the list of comedians who have international fame due to the stand-up comedy is enormous. Among them, there are Bob Hope, Ed Sullivan, Mort Sahl, Dick Gregory, Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, Johnny Carson, Robin

21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQvIk7EPi-g&list=RDUQvIk7EPi-g#t=21>

22 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYCF\\_rppZCY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYCF_rppZCY)

23 <http://www.theworldstandsup.com/>

24 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_stand-up\\_comedians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_stand-up_comedians)

Williams, Jerry Seinfeld, Whoopy Goldberg, Ellen DeGeneres, Sarah Silverman and Louis C. K.

When this type of show is enjoyed by different peoples, it gets adapted to different environments. That happens because humor is hardly translatable, a fact that explains why certain comedy shows produced in certain countries do not work on other countries. What is common is the general characteristics of a stand-up. Among them there is the presence on stage of a comedian in a solo act, standing up, without props or scenarios, who talks to the audience in a direct manner with quick jokes, involving wordplay, metaphors, parodies, malapropisms and insults that violate cultural, linguistic, social, political, moral and religious norms. His preferential style is satire. In the environment where the show happens, in which the audience willingly and selectively go to, the comedian makes his social and cultural criticism using a language that would not be possible to use on another context. The content of his jokes is generally fictional, but oftentimes the comedian uses real situations and characters. In general, this type of show is an opinionated, sharp and funny chronicle of reality.

The origins of stand-up are multifaceted and ancient. In Jewish communities of the Middle East, the presence of these type of comedians was frequent. The mission of badhan or badran (term that derives from the verb entertain and that in the Yiddish pronunciation sounds like *badchen*)<sup>25</sup> was to amuse guests to an event such as a wedding, with their acting, songs and anecdotes<sup>26</sup>. Other influences are the vaudeville theatre, the music hall, burlesque art and commedia dell'arte. Later on, TV talk-shows popularized the genre even more. International festivals ended up giving stand-up a global status<sup>27</sup>.

25 <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Badkhonim>

26 It is the case of Yoel Lebovits. See <https://www.youtube.com/user/aroundthevelt>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ra0eDSXNmhE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xR5Q-FffltM>

27 Among them, are: Dave's Leicester Comedy Festival – Leicester & Leicestershire, England; Kilkenny Cat Laughs Comedy Festival – Kilkenny, Ireland; Melbourne International Comedy Festival – Melbourne, Australia; Just for Laughs International Comedy Festival – Montreal, Quebec; Edinburgh Festival Fringe – Edinburgh, Scotland; New Zealand International Comedy Festival – Auckland,

In Brazil, the genre was recently popularized with the acting of a new and numerous generation of comedians equally influenced by the north-american experience<sup>28</sup>. However, it is important to emphasize that shows similar to stand-up were made in a recent past. The generation of national pioneers includes José Vasconcelos<sup>29</sup>, Chico Anysio<sup>30</sup>, Jô Soares and Juca Chaves, among others. In these shows, the comedian breaks the silence that protects certain themes and truths to be told. The political correctness is not popular in this genre. That always implies a certain aggressiveness, stereotyping and vulgar language from the comedians. They usually say that they would rather lose the friend, but not a good joke. A comical situation is always original and results from the creative effort. Stand-up comedians also say that they don't make humor to be loved. It seems that this tendency to transgression is what attracts the audience to the show.

Each one of them have a style. At times, the humor exorcized by the comedian aims at producing empathy (causing on the audience an emotion that is similar from the speaker). At other times, he aims at doing self-critic and with their mockery producing a sensation of self-deprecation to the audience. The audience, in turn, expects that the comedian makes a show, that is, serial acts capable of producing laughter. And, as said, in this type of meeting, the audience comes to the show open to laugh easily (FREUD, 1905).

## Study and Conclusions

The Saudi case is exceptional and that is why it deserves to be analyzed. As previously pointed out, humor as social criticism found, in this country, a specific form of expression and a technological channel of fun and

---

New Zealand; Woman in Comedy Festival – Boston, USA; and the CMW Comedyfest – Ontario, Canadá. See [www.worldcomedy.club](http://www.worldcomedy.club)

28 Among them, are: Rafinha, Danilo Gentili, Diogo Portugal, Fábio Rabin, Fábio Porchat e Marcela Leal <http://lista10.org/humor/10-stand-up-comedy-que-valem-a-pena-ver-na-internet/> See also <http://www.standupcomedy.com.br/>

29 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_yaToH29IcQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yaToH29IcQ)

30 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8u3lwQp8IuM->

entertainment, one of the few that are accessible to the population. For your comprehension, it is important to consider the surveilled and conservative social context to what these messages are shared. Therefore, in this study is necessary to do a content analysis of the presentations of 13 of these comedians. Such shows are available on YouTube and were selected for analysis through a list available on the web. This list presents 20 Arab and Muslim comedians of 10 different countries<sup>31</sup>. This study integrates a wider research project about the properties of dissident communication. The method used included the following steps: (a) each joke was registered and (b) their content, catalogued. They were then (c) inserted in categories capable of pointing out the general nature of these presentations. The result is in Table 1 below.

The choice of these people is explained by the prominence of Islam and the Arab world started to have in international politics, especially after the Al Qaeda attacks in the United States in 2001. It is relevant to observe the humor that emerges from this ethnic and cultural community, considering the context of distrust and animosity that exists in current international relations. It is surprising the role of comedy in facilitating intercultural communication and in the diffusion of a social, political and religious critique in Middle Eastern countries where usually is impossible for comedy to exist.

It is clear that the comedian elaborates a complex and critic speech about different aspects of social life. In the speeches of the comedians we researched about there is not any vulgar language, something that happens more frequently with Brazilian comedians. There are no direct attacks to political and religious personalities and there is no explicit aggressiveness. The choice of topics depends on the audience. That is, the stand-up comedian always takes into consideration in his script and on improv the psychosocial environment of the audience.

We can see that the Arab and Muslim comedians have a common link that is creating humorously about the theme of the Muslim and

31 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_stand-up\\_comedians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_stand-up_comedians)

TABLE 1. The content of stand-up comedy in shows of Arab and Muslim comedians.

Comedian	Themes of the jokes	Content
<b>Omar Hussein</b> (Saudi comedian, host of the 3al6ayer Show).	Family habits	Uses and habits
	Love	Arab women
	Women's condition in Arab society	
	Seduction of women by men in Arab society. The use of alcoholic beverage in Arab society.	
<b>Omar Ramzi</b> (Sudanese Muslim whose mom is Scottish and whose father is Sudanese. Known as WS – White Sudani).	The dilemma of being a white sudani.	Human identity
	Trying to explain at the checkpoints in Arab countries: he is white, but he is also Sudanese.	
<b>Fahad Albutairy</b> (He is the first stand-up comedian in Saudi Arabia. Hosts the La Yekthar Show on YouTube).	Criticizes public security habits in Arab society.	National Security
	Ironizes flight routine.	Social habits
	Ironizes common day-to-day habits.	
<b>Imran Yousuf</b> (British Muslim of hindu descent born in Kenya)	Muslims living in England	Social stereotypes
	Criticism to the royal family	Human identity
	Disdain to the poor	Social criticism
<b>Ali Fingerz</b> (Comedian in Bahrein)	Multiculturalism	
	Ironizes people's interest in politics	Politics
	Ironizes the mood of insecurity	National security
	Criticize women's situation in Arab society	Women in Arab society
	Ironizes the size of his country	
	Criticize the divisions of class existing in airplanes, something he calls 'walk of shame'	Geopolitics
	Criticizes Iranians and praises the Philipinos	Social status
	"Being arab in a Brazilian beach": the nudity of Brazilian women is something frightening	Friends and enemies
	Cultural shock	
<b>Russell Peters</b> (Canadian who lives in the United States of Hindu descent)		Social stereotypes
		Human identity

TABLE 1 (continuation)

Comedian	Themes of the jokes	Content
<b>Azhar Usman</b> (Muslim comedian who lives in Chicago).	Makes ironic sketches of how americans say 'salam'. Plays with his appearance of a practicing Muslim in an American society.	Cultural shock
<b>Ahmed Ahmed</b> (Comedian from Egypt).	Ironizes his situation of having to travel with a name that is similar to the names of terrorists included in names of security services.	Human identity Ethnic stereotypes
<b>Rami Salameh</b> (Comedian from Lebanon).	Marriage Traffic rules Marketing of Ikea Shopping malls Mother	Consumption and the woman
<b>Maz Jobrani</b> (Iranian-American known as Persian Pink Panther).		Ethnic and national stereotypes
<b>Nemr Abou Nassar</b> (Lebanese)	Makes a well-humored chronicle of uses and habits in today's Lebanon: seduction between men and women; the way people talk on the phone; the difference between men and women; ironizes Lebanese accent abroad	Identity
<b>Imran al Aradi</b>		National identity of a Bahrein citizen
<b>Amer Zahr</b> (Palestinian/American)	Palestine/Israel conflict	National identity
<b>Ray Hanania</b> (Palestinian/American)		Social stereotypes Identity Self-criticism
<b>Ali Al Sayed</b> (United Arab Emirates)		Ethnic and national identity

Arab identity nowadays. To a great extent, there are, in all of them, a communion of interest, of fighting against islamophobia and against anti-Arab stereotypes cultivated in the West. Group identity is a theme that is used equally in comedians of other origins. That is the case, for example, of Samson Koletkar, a Jewish Hindu from Mumbai belonging to the group Bnei Israel<sup>32</sup>.

There are only few specific cases in which there are opening engagement in favor of some political cause. It is the case of Ray Hanina, a Palestinian man married to a Jewish woman. He creates his show about peace between both peoples. This is also the attitude of Dean Obaidallah, co-creator of Stand-Up for Peace. In this event, he and many other Arab and Muslim comedians act along with Jewish comedians, among them, Scott Blakeman<sup>33</sup>. When the target of the comedy is the internal group, what is important is the conflicts, the contradictions and the myths of the collective imaginary to which the own comedian belongs to. Even in tumultuous environments, as the Palestinian territory is, comedy has been serving to the public catharsis of local political problems<sup>34</sup>.

As previously mentioned, the reviewed literature proposes the idea that comedy is an intellectual weapon available to the comedian (KRICHTAFOVICH, 2006). And as proposed, his transgression is benign by occurring in a special situation, that is created by the voluntary participation of the audience of a show. But what characterizes the comedian's speech is his deviant character (BERGSON, 1980). When he escapes the established norm, he surprises people, something that creates laughter. That is why the joke of the satire permeated by sarcasm can be called subversive (CABRAL, 2007).

The amicable context protects the comedian and makes the message palatable which in another context would be received sharply by a good amount of the audience. A classic example of this type of manifestation is the act of the American comedian George Carlin (who died in 2008).

32 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUAEBEsQjUQ>

33 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcE5nLymJLs>

34 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA95W9FKR9o>

His presentations were philosophical reflections filled with irony about the common sense. Frequently, his black humor was polemic in an acid way about themes that were taboo, something that even got him arrested in the 70's<sup>35</sup>. In Brazil, a similar character would be Juca Chaves. His jokes make him famous in showbiz. Since 1955, he makes political satire. In his solo shows, he used to criticize uses and habits as well as national characters<sup>36</sup>. One example of that was his song called "Brazil goes to war", created in 1960, but release one year after that<sup>37</sup>.

### Final Considerations

In the examined sample we can consider, as previously mentioned, the content of the jokes produced by this diverse set of comedians that act in different parts of the world with a similar theme, that is, the insertion of the Arab and Muslim community into modern days and the values cultivated by them. The main themes of these shows are the ethnic stereotype; the identity and group self-esteem; the dilemmas of intercultural interlocution; the cultural shock and the values of the Arab, Muslim and Western society.

Humor allows these comedians to spread in a mitigated way critical messages (WAINBERG, 2015). Among them are, for example, a sharp criticism to the women's condition in Arab society and the other would be Western societies that stereotype Muslims in a hostile way. Therefore, comedy performs the role of a mediator and a facilitator of a conversation among civilizations. In conclusion, it is an instrument of collective education.

We can also say that the stand-up comedy show is a therapeutic space in which the comedian elevates the audience's self-esteem allowing them to laugh at something that before was presented as untouchable, holy and/or dogmatic. The context of interlocution is amicable by being

35 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyBH5oNQOS0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMyDvqnwIm4>

36 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDlxQJNemEo>

37 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8POa5mdXLBQ>

a space of freedom, something inexistent in other formal and surveilled environments of social living. It differs from the interactions in which communication is tense and the shrewd criticism of the speaker is responded in an aggressive way by the listener. In a stand-up comedy show, contained emotions bubble up by the audience, and the silence imposed by cordiality, by political correctness and the fear of social ostracism is broken.

Ultimately, in the researched shows, predominates the theme of difference, either between men and women, between western and Arab/Muslim, between social classes, between friends and enemies, between habits, and between cultures. The difference allows contrast, and through it, the comedian is capable of emphasizing polemic singularities.



## References

- ALBERTI, V. O riso e o risível na história do pensamento. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1999.
- AL-SAYYID, M. K. 'What went wrong with Mubarak's regime?' In: TSCHIRGI, D. et al. (Orgs.). Egypt's Tahrir Revolution. Denver: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013.
- ATTARDO, S. Linguistic theories of humor. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.
- BERGSON, H. O riso. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1980.
- BOYD, B. Laughter and Literature: A Play Theory of Humor. *Philosophy and Literature*, v. 28, n. 1, p. 1-22, 2004.

- CABRAL, O. O riso subversivo. Maceio: Edupal, 2007.
- DRIESSENS, O. The celebrityization of society and culture: understanding the structural dynamics of celebrity culture. *International Journal of Culture Studies*, 16(6), p. 641-657, 2012.
- FREUD, S. *O chiste e sua relação com o inconsciente*. Rio de Janeiro: Delta, 1959.
- JONES, C. W. Representation without taxation: the King's Dilemma 2.0. New Haven: Yale University, 2012.
- KRICHTAFOVITCH, I. *Humor theory*. Parker: Outskirts Press, 2006.
- KRIKMANN, A. *Contemporary linguistic theories of humor*. 2006. Available at: <<https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol33/kriku.pdf>>.
- MARQUES J.; NEVES, I. *O riso segundo Cícero e Quintiliano*: tradução e comentários de De Oratore, livro II, 216-291(De Ridiculis) e da Institutio Oratoria, livro VI, 3 (De risu). Dissertação. USP. 2008. Available at: <<http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8143/tde-13102008-154439/pt-br.php>>.
- MCGRAW, A. P.; WARREN, C. Benign violations: making immoral behavior funny. *Psychological Science*, 21(8), p. 1141-9, 2010.
- MIOTTI, C. M. Ridentem Dicere Vervm: o humor retórico de Quintiliano e seu diálogo com Cícero, Catulo e Horácio. Tese. Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2010. Available at: <<http://www.bibliotecadigital.unicamp.br/document/?code=000772890>>.
- OTTAWAY, M.; DUNNE, M. Incumbent regimes and the "King's Dilemma" in the Arab World. Carnegie Endowment, 2007. Available at: <[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp88\\_ruling\\_parties\\_final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp88_ruling_parties_final.pdf)>.
- PROVINE, R. *Laughter: a scientific investigation*. Londres: Penguin Books, 2001.
- ROBERT, L. The basic humor process: a cognitive-shift theory and the case against incongruity. Londres: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999.
- SHANE, S. Dismantling utopia: how information ended the Soviet Union. Londres: Ivan Dee, 1995.
- SJÖBOHM, J. Stand-up comedy around the world: Americanization and the role of globalized media. Suécia: Malmo University, 2008.
- TUFEKCI, Z. Not this one: social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, XX(X), p. 1-23, 2013.
- WAINBERG, J. Entretenimento, a utopia e o discurso mitigado. *Revista E-Compós*, v. 18, n.1, p. 1-21, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. O ativismo das estrelas e a comunicação dissidente. *Revista Animus*. v. 15, n. 29, p. 1-21, jul. 2016.

## About the author

Graduated in History at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (1979), Masters degree in Journalism at the University of South Carolina (1990) and PhD in Communication Sciences at the Universidade de São Paulo (1996). Full professor at the Post-Grad Program at the Faculdade de Comunicação Social (FAMECOS) – Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul.

---

Date of submission: 09/13/2016

Date of acceptance: 01/31/2017