The Arab Animation Spring
How Have Arab Animation Artists Used the Power of YouTube and Social Media in Response to the Recent Arab Revolution?

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Abstract
This article explores how YouTube and social media became the main platform for Arab animation artists to distribute their political works during the ‘Arab Spring’ in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East since 2011. During the Arab Spring, Arab people started to use the internet and social media strongly and many political animated clips went viral. Statistics suggest that between 25–40% of the population in the Middle East and North Africa are watching YouTube daily, leading it to become one of the most active regions in the world for internet use. Therefore, the Arab Spring motivated Arab animation artists and studios to distribute their anti-regime clips on YouTube, including their own logos and names without fear of being arrested by the regime and their works being forbidden by censorship. The implication for this is an explosion in the exposure of Arab animation artists and their work in comparison to the very limited opportunities and freedoms of the past determined by regimes exercising control and censorship over traditional media such as television. Using interview data gathered from discussion with artists and animation studios, the article demonstrates how viral animation benefited from social movement in the Arab world in, what appears to be, an ‘Arab animation spring’.

Keywords
Arab Animation, Arab filmmakers, Arab revolution, Arab Spring, Social Media, YouTube, censorship, political communication, Middle East, North Africa, social movement

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Most Arab countries could not produce films until their national independence from British, French, Italian and Turkish colonial rule, which affected negatively the Arab cinema because of political circumstances (Shafik 2007, p. 9). Egypt had its independence earlier than the other Arab countries and started film production first which later became the so-called ‘Arab Hollywood’. However, most of the Arab regimes and governments have legal restrictions and censorship that control the media’s freedom of expression. Therefore, the Arab filmmakers face many challenges in producing their films, especially if the content of these films contains politics, sex or religion (ibid. p.33-35). All film projects used to require an approval by a special authority before or after shooting and producing any film – the so-called ‘film visa’; this committee had the authority to approve or reject films, and had the power to enforce filmmakers to cut some scenes from their films (ibid. p. 34). Thus, hundreds of Arabic films became the so-called ‘cave films’ – never being screened for a large audience (ibid. p. 35, 243). The films had to be suitable to the country’s ideology, tradition, policy and religion.

It is worth noting that the censorship was not only in the Arab region; most of the countries around the world have or used to have censorship including the United States of America. Between 1934 and 1968, the Production Code Administration (PCA) required the filmmakers and producers in the United States to submit their scripts, lyrics and completed films to the censorship board for approval before release (Cohen 2004, p. 31-32, 44). In addition, The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) verified the contents of works in production and ‘took this matter seriously’ by using the PCA. For example, Disney studios agreed to change any mention of the FBI to ‘federal security officer’ after two of Disney’s live-action features, Moon Pilot (1962) and That Darn Cat (1965), were seen to be depicting the FBI in an ‘unflattering light’ (ibid. p. 34).

In 1968 the Motion Picture Association of America replaced their censorship system with a ratings system which categorised films and their content’s suitability for certain audiences, especially children (ibid. p. 45). This system took the responsibility of informing parents whether film content was suitable for their children or not depending on whether the film contained violence, sex and other strong images and language. Films were released with different ratings such as G (general audience), M (mature audience, later changed to GP then PG to suggest parental guidance) and X (adult only, later changed to A).

For many years the Arab filmmakers and producers became the self-censors of their work to avoid trouble with the censorship board. Writers of cartoon shows were ‘responsible for creating scripts free of problems’ (ibid. p. 132). The self-censorship created rules for the Arab filmmakers themselves which arose out of fear from revealing the truth to the regime. Consequently, the filmmakers tried to avoid depicting unacceptable images due to ideological beliefs which were enforced by the regime. Therefore, the cinematic art in the Arab region was a complicit illusion made by the artists themselves because they could not move beyond their self-censorship (Almabroki, 2012).

The power of the censorship in the Arab region remained strict until unexpected events happened in North Africa and the Middle East. On 17th December 2010, a young Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi from Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire in front of a governor’s official because of life difficulties and in response to the dictatorship after he received a fine from a municipal inspector. The consequences of this self-immolation were protests against the Tunisian regime until the president Zen Ben Ali escaped from the country on 14th January 2011, just days after Mohamed Bouazizi died on 4th January 2011. This revolution – the so-called Arab Spring – inspired the Arab people to protest against their governments’ policy and has been spreading rapidly across the Middle East and North Africa in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and other Arab countries. The Arab people’s expectations for the success of the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East were enhanced by using social media to post numerous messages, opinions and criticisms about democracy and freedom (Howard and Hussain2013, p. 49). Thus, the Arab Spring creates hope to the artists that ‘a new era of artistic freedom and opportunity had finally arrived’ (Jaafar, 2012). Before the Arab Spring, the Tunisian regime insisted that any film posted online required the filmmaker to gain official permission from the authorities. If this was not done, the consequences were that the filmmaker could be fined and jailed for ‘causing harm by means of telecommunication networks’ (ibid. p. 84).
However, after the Tunisian revolution, the censorship boards started to lose their power in most of the Arab countries; the Arab Spring motivated Arab artists and gives them hope to expose their creativity and distribute their political visual arts by using social media such as YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook and other networks. Many of the Arab artists, cartoonists, animators and studios used social media as an important tool for critiquing their governments whether including their own names or anonymously, and without fear of being arrested by the regime. Their works could not be forbidden by censorship because the government had difficulty policing the internet and digital media networks:

The importance of the internet for contemporary Arab civil society actors can be attributed to two factors: first, many groups were pushed online because other forms of political communication were prohibitively expensive and regulated by the state. Radio commercials and newspapers ads were still beyond the budget of most small civic groups and also similarly regulated by the state. The well-monitored broadcast media were a means by which the state and mainstream political parties regulated discourse. Second, the internet allowed for content to be hosted on servers beyond the control of state censors and afforded anonymity to those who advanced political criticism. During times of crises, when physical space for public conversation and debate closed down, the internet provides virtual spaces for political communication. (ibid. p. 5)

The impact of social media on the recent Arab revolution is ‘leading up to the shift of control from power in people to the power of the people’ (Abdelhay2012, p. 533). The implication of this was an explosion in the exposure of Arab animation artists and their work in comparison to the very limited opportunities and freedoms of the past determined by regimes that exercised control and censorship over traditional media, especially broadcasting. Social media has played an important role in supporting the Arab artists that ‘believe their contribution matters’ to share their works and interact with the Arab audience anytime they want (Jenkins2006, p. 7). Also, the Arab Spring makes the protesters “citizen-documentarians” to believe in the power of moving image, by using their cameras and mobile phones to record and document the dramatic turn of events that happened front of them, and then share these videos with their communities (Jaafar, 2012). This type of contribution is called ‘participatory culture’ which enabled people to share and publish, usually through literature or the internet, their individual expression, news and ideas with others (Jenkins2006, p. 4).

In addition, most social media networks, especially YouTube and Facebook, are free to use and offer the Arab artist and filmmakers the opportunity to distribute their work, made on small budgets, to massive audiences in the Arab region and the rest of the world: much larger in contrast than to those works shown on national television and in the cinema (Abdelhay2012, p. 530). According to Dr. Mohamed Ghazala, the director of regional African and Arabian chapter of the Association Internationale du Film d’Animation (ASHFA):

Arab films were negatively affected by the censorship. Artists whatever their nationalities have to have the freedom of expression in their work without any censorship by governments. I think the Arab Spring becomes the platform of freedom to the Arabic animation artists and studios and I hope the works that will be produced in the future will reflect our creativity to the world. (Ghazala, 29 March 2012 interview)

Social media encourages the Arab artists to use it as a powerful platform for their political self-expression. Cambie (2012, p. 28) points out that the Arab people had been using social media before the revolution for years, but the Arab Spring ‘made people realise just how powerful these tools could be’. For example, WaelGhonim is one of the Egyptian social media activists who started and helped to spark the Egyptian revolution by creating the Facebook memorial page ‘We are all Khaled Said’; this page was about a young blogger who had been arrested and beaten to death by the Egyptian security forces for ‘exposing their corruption’ (Howard and Hussain 2013, p. 21). Ghonim says that everyone contributed small pieces via social media until they had drawn the whole picture of the Egyptian revolution (Cambi 2012, p. 31).

A group of young Egyptian activists and filmmakers believed in the power of moving image by launching a non-profit online media collective called Mosireen during the recent Egyptian revolution. The aim of this project was to film the continuous
events of the revolution, and show the truth to the Egyptian people. Mosireen hosted an online library of moving images from the revolution, which was viewed by millions of visitors to become the most watched non-profit YouTube channel in Egypt of all time (Jaafar, 2012). Moreover, many political cartoonists delivered very powerful messages through their illustrations, such as the Jordanian cartoonist Emad Hajjaj (figure 1), the Syrian Ali Ferzat, the Egyptian Sherif Arafa, and many other cartoonists from the Arab world. The Arab Spring provided great political material to these artists to express themselves on a daily basis due to the rapidly changing events in the Middle East. In addition, social media websites gave the cartoonists the ability to spread their work worldwide during the Arab uprising, and reach millions of people within a few minutes of posting, in comparison to the slow-paced process of traditional media such as newspapers and magazines (Harutyunyan, 2012).

One of the Arab animation studios Kharabeesh ('scribbles' in Arabic) based in Amman, the capital city of Jordan, became one of the most popular Arab YouTube cartoon channels in the Middle East and North Africa as a consequence of the Arab revolution. The studio produced many political clips and music videos featuring Arab political figures, which have been viewed by a large number of audiences and received international channels’ attention such as CNN, France24, ABC News, Aljazeera and other international channels, during the Arab Spring. Subsequently, the studio established a channel called Liberal Scribbles which contains a collection of productions that highlights the revolution’s course of events in a creative manner and creating serious political points; therefore, ‘Nobody is safe from Kharabeesh’s jokes’ (Awad, 2012).

Kharabeesh studio started in 2008 as a small production house, producing social animated videos through simple quality animation, and then posting them on the internet for free to watch. The technique of the majority of Kharabeesh’s animation is cut-out animation. It is a simple animation style that combines photographs and vector graphics together, and then uses computer generated animation, mainly Adobe Flash, software to make flat characters move, talk and change their facial expressions. A number of popular animations were produced using this method, such as the television shows South Park and Angela Anaconda.

The entertainment studio JibJab also uses cut-out animation, and was created by the American brothers Evan and Gregg Spiridellis. They first came to public attention when they posted their first animated political satire online in 2000 called Capitol 3, and received attention from the US news channels and viewers (Robinson 2010, p. 49).

Most of Kharabeesh’s videos could be stylized as limited animation with political mockery dialogue. For example, their characters have simple movements of their hands, arms, heads, and mouths, and the rest of their bodies are almost motionless (figure 2 & 3). Most of the videos are made with simple shadows, static moving cameras and are free of lights. The cut-out animation technique saves production time; the animator does not have to spend many hours creating artwork, such as drawing characters and backgrounds and then changing each individual key frame in animation. The Kharabeesh team wanted to use an animation technique that was less time consuming, as the fast political changes that happened during the Arab Spring inspired them to produce more clips and sketches and upload them to their channel on YouTube every few days. Furthermore, the cut-out technique exports small file sizes that are suitable for Kharabeesh as an online channel. According to Wael Attili, animation director and the co-founder of Kharabeesh:

‘Purposely, we did not want to make high quality animation such as Disney and Pixar. Basically, we celebrate the simple quality; we want to create very simple clips which anybody could make, we want to ‘democratize the creativity’.

(Attili, 23 October 2012 interview)

Before the Arab Spring, Kharabeesh studio tried to find local channels to support and broadcast their projects for the Jordanian audience, but they could not find any supporter. Attili (23 Octo-
ber 2012 interview) indicates that the main problem most of the Arab channels have is that the government support most of the channels without having a commercial mentality. Therefore, the studio started to sell their products to mobile telecommunication companies as mobile content. However, this type of content forced the studio to work with limited technology, such as small video size, low quality, small screen dimensions, and small file size. Therefore, these limitations affected the quality of the animation productions. Consequently, they designed their style specific to mobile technology requirements and then carried on by producing simple cartoon clips. According to Attili (23 October 2012 interview), “I think that people are looking for creativity not visual quality”.

It is worth mentioning that Kharabeesh was active before the Arab revolution, but it became ‘super’ active and more popular during and after the political uprising. Basically, YouTube became the main platform of showing and spreading Kharabeesh works to the Arab and international viewers by streaming their animation on the web, which increase raised their income. Attili (23 October 2012 interview) indicates that the traditional media played an important role in promoting social media by announcing that the recent Arab revolution happened because of social media. Therefore, this resulted in free advertising for YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Afterwards, large numbers of Arab people started to use the internet and social media.

The dynamic of technology in Middle East and North Africa are rated as the highest and fastest growing regions in the developing world (Howard and Hussain 2013, p. 12). Therefore, this development motivated the Arab animation artists and studios to use the internet as the main platform for their works. Moreover, Howard and Hussain (2013, p. 18) indicate that ‘digital media provided the important new tools that allow social movements to accomplish political goals that had previously been unachievable’. Attili said about this issue:

There is no censorship on YouTube, and we can do whatever we want. Basically, we do not need to broadcast our work on the TV, we only need YouTube; you could count the viewer’s numbers, and people interact more with it. Subsequently, we established three other branches in Tunisia, Egypt and Emirates.

Technology such as computers and smart phones helped a lot to spread the Arabic creativity via the internet.

(Attili, 23 October 2012 interview)

The main ‘tipping point’ that happened for Kharabeesh Studio was the Arab revolution. Kharabeesh projects are more concentrating on the contents of the dialogue and imitating the animated voice acting especially the characters of the political leaders. The dialogue of the videos is in Arabic with English and other languages subtitles in order to reach the international viewers and media. For example, their first political video about the Arab revolution was on 19th January 2011: after the Tunisian revolution finished and before the Egyptian revolution started. The three minutes clip was about mocking the Tunisian president Zen Ben Ali who fled from Tunisia to Saudi Arabia by plane. Ben Ali calls some European and Arab leaders such as the French president Nicolas Sarkozy, the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi and other leaders to ask them for hosting (figure 3). The clip by Kharabeesh Studio shows the real heads but drawn bodies with simple lip-sync and bold dialogue. Attili said: The idea of using the real head is to tell the Arab people that this is in fact not a joke, because sometimes representing somebody through an illustration might be seen as symbolic, but we intentionally are looking for Zen Ben Ali in our clip. Consequently, the clip broke all the fear borders; we boldly put our studio’s logo on the clip which talks about the Arab leaders. However, Arab people are not used to political sarcasm in animation, they may have seen it in caricature form, but it did not exist in Arab animation.

(Attili, 23 October 2012 interview)

This simple video with basic animation style spread very fast and drew attention from many international channels. In addition, it was their first video that hit more than one million viewers...
on YouTube. Subsequently, they started to make more simple animated clips consistently about the Arab revolution in Egypt, Libya, and Syria and Yemen. Afterwards, the Arab Spring got more complicated and the situation became more sensitive, which led to Kharabeesh deciding to be more careful about making clips concerning the revolution. They realised that the situation and the consequences of the Arab revolution were not going well, Attili said:

Basically, the fantasy and the romance of the Arab revolution were finished, especially when NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) invaded Libya; I think this killed the innocence of the Arab revolution. Recently, we carefully made some political clips. As well, we are making more variety of videos such as social, comedy, entertainment and animation tutorials, and not only political. (Attili, 23 October 2012 interview)

Social media encouraged the Arab artists not only to create political works, but to recover their previous work that had been banned, due to the strict state censorship, and share these films with the public too (Abdelhay 2012, p. 536). In addition, some artists uploaded their political works during or/and after the Arab Spring due to the rising interest of the Arab people in the political issues and the changing events. Therefore, YouTube became a big archive of Arab animation films and clips which are available to everybody.

A Syrian animation director Akram Agha made a few political shorts before the Arab Spring such as Attention (2005) and The General’s Boot (2008). The length of The General’s Boot film is 17 minutes and he made it on his own, taking around one year to produce. The film tells a story about dictatorship and freedom; the director uses the metaphor as a visual language of his film. For example; the army boots take the role of the leaders as representative of repression and authoritarianism, and the worn shoes take the role of the people (Figure 4).

Agha’s film The General’s Boot mirrored reality three years later; it was similar to the events that occurred during the Arab Spring. Agha (18 January 2013 interview) confirmed that he did not consider that he had predicted the Arab Spring, but that it was “a reading of the history and life cycle”. However, the film was inspired by the ‘Odessa Steps’ scene from the film Battleship Potemkin (1925) by Sergei Eisenstein, and then developed to become more like a prophecy of the Arab Spring.

The film was uploaded on YouTube in 2011 when the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions finished and just a few days before the Syrian revolution started. Agha (18 January 2013 interview) wanted to send a message to the Arab audience through his film’s ending. It shows that the success of a revolution does not necessarily mean the making of a civilized country: the general’s boots could remain even after the revolution. A question was asked to Agha about the reason for not posting the film online before the revolution. From Agha’s point of view this was because of a perceived lack of interest by the Arab audience to this type of political animation, and his subject, an Arab revolution against the regime, was just a fantasy that would never happen.

Social media networks are used as a technological weapon by the Arab artists to criticise the regime, governments and some public behaviours and attitudes. Nevertheless, the right of freedom of expression is still limited because of the strict faith-based internet censorship in the majority of Arab and Muslim countries. Howard and Hussain (2013, p. 83) state that ‘official attribute intervention to preventing the spread of blasphemous or offensive information that challenges the religious and cultural morality of the state’. Also the Arab and Muslim viewers would target and critique the posted videos and check their suitability in order to protect the moral values and the principles of Islam from any offensive and blasphemous content. Hence, the Arab artists should pay attention to public criticism of their art works. Cohen (2004, p. 155) notes about this issue:

The censure of a person can be far more damaging than the censorship of a film. When a film is cut the public loses something that might have occupied the screen for only a few seconds. When a talented person is denied work in his or her chosen field, the public may lose the achievements of a whole career.
The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) gives everyone ‘the right to enjoy the fruits of their scientific, literary, artistic, or technical production and the right to protect the moral and material interests stemming from it, the document stipulates that such content should not be contrary to the principles of Islam Sharia’ (Noman 2011, p. 3). Arab filmmakers have enough cultural knowledge and life experience to know what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in order to avoid offending the Muslims; they know the importance of dealing with their cultural boundaries. Nevertheless, the Arab filmmakers should play it safe and consult Islamic councils to avoid any serious problems with the Islamic world in case they want to post any artistic work online which includes Islamic content.

The Arab Spring expanded the boundaries of the freedom of expression for the Arab people in North Africa and the Middle East. Therefore, Arab animation artists used the power of social media, especially YouTube, to distribute their political works during the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East since 2011 without fear of being arrested by the regime. The implication for this is an explosion in the exposure of Arab animation artists and their work in comparison to the very limited opportunity and freedoms of the past determined by regimes that practice control and censorship over traditional media such as television, cinema, radio and newspapers. Finally, social media provided access to a big archive of Arab animation which is now available to everybody.

List of Illustration:

Figure 2. Kharabeesh Cartoon Channel. 2011. Hosni Mubarak & the 40 Thieves. [Online video still]. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cot3i_nMtUg>[Accessed 22 November 2012].


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