“Political Media and the Mediation of Politics: Popular Media, Censorship, and US-MENA Relations”

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This paper looks at the interface between popular media and politics through the case study of Egyptian talk show host Bassem Youssef’s show El Bernameg (The Program). The affiliation between Youssef’s El Bernameg and American talk show host Jon Stewart’s The Daily Show has been pointed out by several analysts, and Youssef himself makes no secret of this inspiration, taking pride in appearing on The Daily Show in June 2012, facts that have aided in dubbing Youssef “the Egyptian Jon Stewart.” As such, El Bernameg—in the various shapes it has taken from YouTube channel to TV weekly show—has been seen by many as a perfect case of cultural imperialism and hegemony, a new manifestation of center-margin relations: American and Egyptian media, respectively. This paper argues, however, that the picture is not as simple or transparent as that, and gets more problematized with the appearance of two other factors on the scene: 1- Censorship: For in its “speaking truth to power” and its enactment of “symbolic violence,” to use Edward Said’s and Pierre Bourdieu’s notions, respectively, El Bernameg has cultivated various enemies whose status quo the show disrupts and subverts, the most recent being the arrest warrant issued in March 2013 against Youssef by the Egyptian Public Prosecutor on allegations of insulting both Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi and Islam--accusations instigated by the conservative religious discourse and censorship dynamics of supporters of the ruling Islamic Freedom and Justice Party. This and Youssef’s release on bail have caused an international wave of support for Bassem Youssef, among which was Stewart’s 11-minute segment during an April 2013 episode: “Viva Hate,” a segment during which he lambastes president Morsi and which he concludes by calling Youssef “my friend, my brother,” citing Egypt and Islam as the “two things he loves in this world with all his heart.” I argue that this segment and the discourse Stewart adopts (inspired by the nationalist and religious discourses of the Muslim Brothers, of whom the Freedom and Justice Party is an offshoot) tip the balance of the transnational center-margin relationship. It acts as an example of the margin interpolating the center and dictating for the latter the direction it should take and the discourse it should adopt. 2- Politics: The situation gets complicated further when the US Embassy in Cairo’s Twitter account posts a link to Stewart’s monologue on April 2, 2013, upon which an account affiliated with president Morsi, @EgyPresidency, describes the Embassy’s behavior as “inappropriate” for a diplomatic mission, referring to the video as “negative political propaganda,” which causes the Embassy’s Twitter page to shut down for an hour and then return without said link. This, in turn, instigated a statement from American State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland characterized by typical American Administration ambiguity. In her statement she says that embassies and consulates are expected “to use good policy judgment” in managing the content on their feeds, but refuses to take a clear stance on either re-tweeting the link or Youssef’s arrest, at the same time that she refers to “disturbing trend” of growing restrictions on freedom of expression in Egypt. I argue that this is another example of the transnational interpolation of politics by media, that Nuland’s ambivalence in fact reflects American Administration’s sense of their waning popularity among Egyptian citizens due to US foreign policy, culminating in president Obama’s recent statement about Jerusalem being the “capital” of Israel in March 2013. Thus, in examining this American-inspired Egyptian talk show alongside the incidents of censorship it has instigated and reactions to these in Egypt and the US, the paper aims to analyze the processes of containment/resistance between the center and margin of politics and media in Egypt, on
one level, processes of transnational cultural hegemony/interpolation between American and Egyptian media, on a second, and the ramifications of these on US/Egyptian political relations, on a third.