Satire as Safety Valve: Moving Beyond a Mistaken Metaphor

Abstract

The safety valve metaphor is ubiquitous in scholarship on satire and usually implies that, although the genre seems intent on upsetting the political order, it really has unintended conservative effects which maintain the status quo. Although there is previous criticism of the safety valve theory, which focuses on the inadequacy of its empirical predictions or the flawed theoretical foundations of the associated relief theory of humor, the metaphor remains in common use – and continues to obscure our understanding of satire's political effects. What remains overlooked in humor studies is the fundamental mistakenness of the metaphor itself. We argue that comparing satire to a safety valve always implies a reasoning about the genre which is mistaken because the mechanistic function of a safety valve cannot be informatively mapped onto the political effects of satire. As a result, the safety valve metaphor is problematically opaque (because its actual meaning is unclear) and elastic (because it means whatever anyone wants it to mean). The metaphor fails to elucidate how satire works even in authoritarian political contexts, like Egypt, which should, in principle, act as a fertile ground for its purported function as a safety valve.

Keywords: satire, metaphor, Egypt, politics

1 Introduction

Satire is often compared to a "safety valve for human beings who are not permitted to question custom or law in any other way" (Snodgrass 1996, 461) because it enables them "to reduce the frustrations inflicted through taboos, laws, and conventions" (Speier 1998, 1395-1396). This enduring and ubiquitous metaphor expresses a functionalist understanding of satire as sustaining individual and collective wellbeing in an unjust political system, where an elite strives to maintain the status quo. In this system, satire cathartically releases anger and frustration, which safeguards the wellbeing of the general populace in the face of political inequality. The political upshot of satire as a safety valve is both therapeutic and conservative. By venting their frustrations about the political system, satirists and audiences not only maintain their sanity, but also dissipate anger and frustration, which could otherwise upset the political system (by leading to reform or even revolution). Thus, satire is allegedly an instrument to maintain the status quo.

However, despite its continuing popularity, we argue that the conception of satire as a safety valve is fundamentally mistaken and unhelpfully skewers our understanding of its political affordances. Criticism of safety valve theories is not unprecedented. Although the safety valve metaphor is commonly used to clarify the basic tenets of the release theory of humor, philosophers (Morreall, 2009, 23) and psychologists (Martin, 2007, 58) argue that this theory is rooted in an outdated "hydraulic" understanding of emotions. Moreover, historians argue that the predictions of safety valve theories do not adequately capture the political effects of satire and related forms of cultural production, including medieval misrule or carnival (e.g. ‘t Hart, 2007; Humphrey, 2001). Yet, given how enduring the metaphor remains in humor studies (e.g. Gini and Singer 2020, 31; Farjami 2017, *passim*), these criticisms have proven insufficient.

The crux is that existing criticism of safety valve theories does not address the real issue. It is not just that the political predictions or theoretical assumptions implied by the safety valve metaphor are frequently disproven by historical or empirical evidence. The real issue is that the *metaphor itself* is fundamentally mistaken, especially when applied to satire. We do not mean that all metaphorical thinking about satire is by default misleading. On the contrary, so-called "conceptual metaphors" are fundamental to reasoning about complex and abstract phenomena (Lakoff and Johnson 1991). Hence, the ubiquitous and enduring safety valve metaphor is more than just a figure of speech because it encapsulates a widespread kind of reasoning about how satire works and generates political impact. Yet, this reasoning does not adequately capture how satire may or may not influence the political world. Our point is not to deny that satire may be put to conservative uses in certain contexts. Rather, the reasoning implied by the safety valve metaphor – that satire directly and automatically causes emotional and political effects – does not adequately capture how satire works (including when it has a conservative influence). Instead, satire generates political impact in a more indirect and incremental way (see Double 2020; Quirk 2015; Day 2011). Therefore, scholars and critics should refrain from comparing satire to a safety valve altogether.

This article does not aim to document the political impact of satire, but to dismiss the ubiquitous and enduring safety valve metaphor, which often gets in the way of more carefully historicized investigation into satire's influence on the political world. There are three remaining sections and a conclusion. Section II demonstrates that scholars and critics do not just *sometimes* use the safety valve metaphor in debates about satire, but that the metaphor is ubiquitous – and therefore warrants critical scrutiny. Section III goes beyond existing criticism of safety valve theories by arguing that the metaphor is problematically opaque (because its actual meaning is unclear) and elastic (because it means whatever anyone wants it to mean). We also argue that the mechanistic automaticity of a safety valve cannot be informatively mapped onto the political effects of satire. Section IV considers counterarguments through a historicized case study of satire in Egypt. The safety valve metaphor is prevalent in scholarship on Egyptian satire, which conceives of Egypt's authoritarian context as a fertile ground for satire's purported function as a safety valve. However, close analysis of satirical examples from before and after the 2011 Revolution reveals that engaging with satire is a dynamic and historically situated activity which is misrepresented by the mechanistic automaticity implied by the safety valve metaphor. It is also clear that the safety valve metaphor implies an "all-or-nothing" (Double 2020, 168) view of satire's political impact which is fundamentally unhelpful and mistaken.

2 Why the safety valve metaphor is ubiquitous

The safety valve metaphor is ubiquitous in scholarship on satire and, irrespective of other differences in disciplinary or theoretical frameworks, usually implies the unintended conservative effects of a genre that seems intent on upsetting the political order by design. According to Dustin Griffin, satire is a "'safety valve' – a relatively harmless venting of spleen or steam" (1990, 131-132). Griffin posits that "satire needs a little repression – something to push against – and a political system needs a means to let off steam. The result is equilibrium" (1990, 132). Similarly, Leonard Freedman argues "that satire serves as a safety valve, venting frustrations that might otherwise be expressed in political action" (2008, 163; see also Speier 1998, 1395-1396).

The conservative implications of the safety valve metaphor are underpinned by its supposed therapeutic and cathartic function. As Egon Larsen puts it, satire is "a way in which an oppressed people preserves its sanity" (1980, 3; see also Snodgrass 1996, 461). Typical examples of satire's professed safety valve function include Afro-American satire in the antebellum South (Piersen, 1976, 166), jokes about the pope among Catholic clergy (Oldani, 1988, 82), satirical jokes under the Franco regime (Brandes, 1977, 345-346), and anti-militaristic satire magazines like *Simplicissimus* in Wilhelmine Germany (Taylor Allen, 2015, 107).

Given satirical expression's supposed function as a safety valve, some scholars argue that authoritarian governments consciously tolerate if not actively promote it (Zijderveld, 1968). Sometimes, satirists themselves endorse similar ideas. John Lloyd, co-producer of the British political puppet show, *Spitting Image*, contends that "if we did have any effect [in Thatcherite Britain], it was more likely to have kept the government in power for longer, as we provided a pretty large-scale safety valve for a lot of people" (Wroe, 2009).

This brief overview demonstrates that the safety valve metaphor remains ubiquitous in scholarship and criticism about satire, and that it is not just "one figure of speech among many others". This ubiquity follows from the enduring popularity of the hydraulic understanding of emotion, which far predates the invention of the actual safety valve in the late seventeenth century. Perhaps the most common of such hydraulic metaphors is that "people need to 'let off steam' from time to time as the pressure from accumulated irritations increases" (McReynolds, 1990, 151). Already in fifteenth-century Europe, clerics defended carnival as a necessary periodic release from foolishness, by comparing people to wine barrels, which need occasional airing to prevent them from bursting (Burke, 1978, 202). Such hydraulic metaphors can be traced back as far as the Roman origins of (the concept) satire. James Sutherland explains, "[w]e need not take Persius too literally when he says that he must speak out or burst; but much of the world's satire is undoubtedly the result of a spontaneous, or self-induced, overflow of powerful indignation, and acts as a catharsis for such emotions" (1958, 4).

To offer a full genealogy of why exactly, in this larger field of hydraulic metaphors, the safety valve metaphor became so ubiquitous is beyond the scope of our investigation. Yet, this particular metaphor has become the dominant figure of speech in humor studies to explicate the relief theories of Sigmund Freud (1905), Herbert Spencer (1911), and later Arthur Koestler (1964) (see Morreall, 2009, 23; Martin, 2007, 58). Although Freud himself did not introduce the safety valve metaphor in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), he did so in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900, 79). Likewise, Spencer may not have used the actual safety valve metaphor in *On the Physiology of Laughter* (1911), but he did introduce several other hydraulic figures of speech, including "explode" (397), "overflow" (398), "vent" (398), and "pressure" (402). Koestler, in turn, explicitly stated that "[l]aughter may be regarded as providing a safety-valve for the overflow of emotional energy" (1964, 96-97).

Although these hydraulic theories do not explicitly have a political dimension, we can nonetheless see how the safety valve metaphor starts to adopt conservative implications in modern interpretations of relief theories. John Morreall provides the example of a child who "is not allowed to take out his hatred by assaulting the teacher" and – explaining the tenets of the relief theory – argues that "if the teacher should simply trip and fall in front of the class, the pent-up energy of the student's hatred will find release in his laughter." (1983, 21-22). He also specifies that "[a] more serious kind of pent-up energy would be found in those forced to live under the heavy restrictions of a dictatorship" (Morreall 1983, 22), which is reminiscent of the typical discourse associated with the safety valve metaphor in satire studies (see above).

Apart from a hydraulic model of emotions, the other main theoretical foundation of the safety valve metaphor is functionalism, according to which culture is a holistic organism that strives for equilibrium (Stallybrass and White, 1986, 72). In this framework, the function of satire is to relieve frustration before it generates real political disruption, so that equilibrium (the status quo) is maintained. Functionalist ideas about the regulated release of societal pressure were already endorsed by sixteenth and seventeenth century notables including James I/IV and his successor Charles I (Marcus, 1989, 5-6), John Dryden (1693, 133) and the French lawyer Claude de Rubys (Davis, 1975, 97). Likewise, in the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass, an Afro-American abolitionist who escaped from slavery, argued that holiday festivities in the antebellum South acted as "safety-valves to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity" (1849, 75).

The enduring popularity of functionalism and a hydraulic understanding of emotion in folk psychology explains why not only satire, but also a great variety of other phenomena, are regularly identified as safety valves, including gambling regulation (Becker, 2014, 237), labor migration (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018), the foundation of the Indian National Congress (Wedderburn, 2002, 63-64), WikiLeaks' safeguarding of human rights (Malcolm, 2012, 45), and informal containment strategies in China (Chen, 2016, 281). Even Brexit (Carswell, 2017), alongside the gaffes of Prince Phillip (Hawes, 2017), are described as outlets for preventing the rise of far-right populism in Britain. It should already give to wonder whether a metaphor that is equally applied to gambling regulation, whistleblowing, and labor migration can genuinely capture something informative about a complex phenomenon like satire. As we will see now, the safety valve metaphor is in fact fundamentally mistaken when applied to satire.

3 Why the safety valve metaphor is mistaken

Despite the metaphor's enduring popularity, hydraulic and functionalist safety valve theories have almost invariably been dismissed as inadequate upon closer inspection, including in predications about labor migration (Shannon, 1954), dance (Spencer, 1986, 4), the birth of the Indian National Congress (Banerjee-Dube, 2015), and the conservative upshot of online critique in China (Link and Xiao, 2013). More to the point, safety valve theories of workplace satire (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995; 't Hart, 2007, 6-7) and licensed misrule (Davis, 1975, 97) have also been criticized. In fact, the limitations of the safety valve view of carnival were already considered as well established more than twenty years ago (Humphrey, 2001, x; Dentith 1995).

Scholars have introduced various (and sometimes contrastive) arguments against the safety valve view of carnival and satire, including that licensed misrule often coincides with actual rebellion (Burke, 1978, 203); carnival and satire can stimulate political action (Rhodes, 2002); governments do not hold very sophisticated views about humor (Davies, 1984, 156); humor does not have a big social impact (Davies 2007); and carnival is pluralistic, and can be conservative, progressive or politically neutral (Stallybrass and Allon, 1986, 14-15; Scott, 1990, 178).

Scholars of humor have also dismissed the hydraulic theory of emotions (Morreall, 2009, 23; Martin, 2007, 58). Moreover, psychologists have dismissed the idea that venting anger, trauma, or sadness (through behaviors such as crying) dissipates negative emotions (Kennedy-Moore and Watson, 2011, 25ff). In fact, venting soon after a traumatic event might actually predict worse psychological outcomes (Seery et al., 2008), while blowing off steam by ranting online (Martin et al., 2013) or punching pillows ultimately tends to increase anger (Bushman, 2002, 725). One plausible explanation is that engaging in such behavior does not dissipate the emotions but stimulates them by creating and fortifying neural connections (Evans, 2003, 58). Psychological and neuroscientific perspectives therefore support claims that occasions of licensed misrule could very well be "dress rehearsals or provocations for actual insurgencies" (Haugerud, 2013, 81; see Scott, 1990, 179).

Nonetheless, despite these significant criticisms, the safety valve metaphor remains ubiquitous in scholarship and criticism about satire (as discussed above). For example, Al Gini and Abraham Singer argue that "[j]oke telling and satire are, at the very least, a pleasant distraction. They are a timeout. They offer a moment of reprieve. They are a safety valve" (2020, 31). Crucially, such use of the safety valve metaphor is casual and tries to capture something essential about satire without signing up to the full-blown theoretical ramifications of a hydraulic theory of emotion or societal functionalism. Hence, by targeting the tenets of relief theory and functionalism, existing criticism of safety valve theories about satire does not suffice to deter from using the *metaphor itself*.

And yet, we argue that the problem is the metaphor itself. The crux is that metaphorical thinking, even when it appears casual, always expresses reasoning; scholars and critics fall back on the safety valve metaphor because they consider it a useful shorthand for capturing and clarifying their reasoning about satire. Cognitive Metaphor Theory explains that we generally grasp abstract complexities by mapping more concrete experiences from sensorimotor domains onto them through "conceptual metaphors" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, 45). For example, we may think of love as a journey. Crucially, such conceptual metaphors "are used to reason with. The Love Is A Journey mapping does not just permit the use of travel words to speak of love.

That mapping allows forms of reasoning about travel to be used in reasoning about love" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, 65). Such metaphorical reasoning can be very useful. For example, I might get the right perspective on a heated argument with my partner by framing it as just "a bump in the road", rather than "the end of the road". In this case, what we know about travel successfully maps onto what a romantic relationship entails. The metaphorical meaning is clear, transparent, and unambiguous (i.e., when a problem occurs during travel or a relationship, it does not automatically mean we can no longer reach our goal).

Does the safety valve metaphor similarly clarify the working and impact of satire? Here, we encounter a first issue: the metaphor's lack of transparency, especially when it functions as a casual shorthand (typically offered in lieu of a more elaborated argument). Although critics and scholars typically rely on the safety valve metaphor as if it is a self-explanatory argument, they often imply different meanings which suggest – but never actually *explain* – satire's working and impact. Consider a critic who decries the contemporaneous state of satire as a "spiritual safety valve" for liberals who snigger at the failings of Posh Spice (Taylor, 2003). Another critic claims that Simon Jay's stand-up comedy show, *Trumpageddon*, functions as a "release valve" for "so many US tourists visiting Edinburgh for the [Fringe] festival" (Ellis-Petersen 2016). Although the safety valve metaphor is supposed to help us understand how satire works and what it achieves, such statements remain puzzlingly opaque.

Not only is the meaning of the safety valve metaphor often insufficiently clear, but the metaphor is also elastic because its meaning is regularly adapted to suit the drift of the argument. For example, one critic worries that satirical impersonations of political leaders "run the risk of rendering the Trumps of this world harmless objects of mirth; they might even act as a safety valve" (Karpf, 2016). The intended meaning here is that satire, unfortunately, dissipates the anger necessary to sustain political opposition. Conversely, another critic refers to Peter Cook's criticism that the popularity of satire in the Weimar Republic did not stop Hitler but adds "[t]hat doesn't mean satire isn't a vital safety valve" (Groskop, 2017). This time, the intended meaning is that satire, fortunately, releases emotional pressure which otherwise would compromise wellbeing. Although such problematic elasticity is conceptually distinct from the metaphor's opacity, these problems do inform each other. As it is not clear what the metaphor really means, it is easy for multiple meanings to circulate; and as multiple meanings circulate, it becomes increasingly unclear what the metaphor really means.

The opacity and elasticity of the safety valve metaphor demands a reassessment of its implied reasoning about satire's political impact. As a complex, idiomatic figure of speech, the safety valve metaphor is underpinned by a more basic primary metaphor, i.e. Causes Are Physical Forces (see Lakoff and Johnson 1991, 53/60). Hence, when scholars and critics call satire a safety valve, they conceptualize the cause of satire's political impact in terms of hydraulic pressure. The reasoning implied by this primary metaphor is supplemented by the commonplace knowledge that safety valves relieve pressure to prevent steam boilers from exploding. The safety valve metaphor therefore implies that satire is a cause which protects the integrity of a system (typically individual wellbeing and/or the political status quo).

Although it is seldom specified, the metaphorical comparison between safety valves and satire is most intuitively mapped onto the working of a boiler in a steam locomotive. The normal functioning of a steam locomotive involves well-determined movement, analogous to the motivated actions of healthy individuals or the steady business of a thriving society. If things go wrong, the locomotive explodes and comes to a violent halt; analogously, emotional disturbance compromises individual wellbeing or upsets the political status quo. While safety valves ensure the normal functioning of steam locomotives by releasing excess pressurized steam, the function of satire is to keep individuals healthy and society stable. In the case of satire, what creates the pressure is political repression; what is released are otherwise disruptive emotions; and the effect is political equilibrium.

The safety valve metaphor implies that the socially disruptive emotion supposedly released through satire is anger (e.g. at a political regime) or anger-related emotions, including outrage (e.g. at the sheer boldness of the regime) or frustration (e.g. at the inability to achieve restitution). According to George Test, satire is "a legitimate aesthetic expression of basic human emotions – anger, shame, indignation, disgust, contempt – emotions that are aroused by universal human behavior – stupidity, greed, injustice, selfishness" (1991, 5). Anger is therefore not the only emotion commonly associated with satire, but, as Catherine Keane argues, the idea that "satire is motivated by, and produced in a state of, anger" was popularized by Juvenal (2015. 11) – and his conception of satire as "a cathartic anger therapy" remains enduring in the safety valve metaphor (2015, 38). David Nokes clarifies the reasoning implied by such metaphorical thinking when he argues that "[b]y allowing anger and indignation to vent themselves in laughter, rather than build into action, satire may be a substitute for, not a summons to, revolution" (1987, 17).

However, although this metaphorical mapping makes intuitive sense, the opacity and elasticity of the safety valve metaphor signal that something is awry. To start, when a steam locomotive blows its safety valve, it is not entirely harmless. Such a release of steam is very loud and, should it happen regularly, constitutes considerable noise pollution. Moreover, it is inefficient, because the sudden and large release of steam equals a loss in power and waste of coal and water resources. Such loss in power may well halt the train altogether. Ironically, if the function of satire actually resembled that of safety valves (which we argue it does not), the upshot would therefore not be a stable sustainment of the status quo. Rather, it would mean satire had real power to upset business as usual and waste governmental resources. Hence, when fully thought through, the reasoning implied by the safety valve metaphor does actually not support the alleged conservative and cathartic effects of satire.

More importantly, the way anger impacts human motivation does not map informatively onto the function of steam in a pressure system. Whereas steam is intentionally produced to ensure the normal working of a locomotive, anger is not intentionally produced by individuals or societies to maintain normal functioning, but serves as a response against a perceived violation. The reasoning implied by the safety valve metaphor is therefore ultimately closer to alchemy than engineering. Consider comedian Tom Lehrer's claim that satire mostly leaves audiences "[s]atisfied rather than angry, which is what they should be" (Thompson 2000). Similarly, John O'Farrell (of Spitting Image) argues that through satire "[o]ur outrage turns into elation and a joke. It's a release valve" (Williams, 2016). If such a process of emotional transmutation really occurred through satire, it is not adequately grasped by the safety valve metaphor, for it would involve the equivalent of transforming excess steam into another substance. The safety valve metaphor is therefore conceptually muddled, which translates itself in the problematic opacity and elasticity highlighted above.

Nevertheless, sweeping generalizations about satire's political impact as a "safety valve" remain common, even if they are often not substantiated by elaborate argumentation. Instead, it is as if calling satire a "safety valve" is by itself a knock-down argument, while it is really meaningless. The crux of the issue is that, unlike the workings of a safety valve, creating or interpreting satire is not a mechanistic process which has a direct and automatic emotional impact on audiences, nor does satire directly or automatically influence the political status quo.

For one, individual psychological moods do not mechanically aggregate into social reactions (see Humphrey, 2001, x). Moreover, the mechanistic reasoning implied by the safety valve metaphor gives little credit to the varied personal, social, and political circumstances under which audiences appreciate and interpret satire - which we will now demonstrate through a case study of satire in Egypt.

4 Why Egyptian satire is not a safety valve

If there is a political context which should lend itself "perfectly" to the alleged safety valve function of satire, Egypt is certainly a strong candidate. Egypt has been governed through a dominant executive monopolized by military cadres, appointed bureaucrats, and big businessmen since the country's independence in 1952, with weak representative institutions and limited press freedoms. The safety valve metaphor is prevalent in contemporary scholarship on satire in similar cases across the Middle East, including in Lebanon (Kazarian 2011, 343), Palestine (Al-Shaikh 2007, 69), Syria (Wedeen 2013, 865), and Iran (Farjami 2017, 149; 193-195; 200-203). Likewise, the literature on Egyptian satire is rife with cathartic interpretations of humor as a safety valve, with a distinction between before and after the 2011 Revolution.

Prior to the Revolution, which put an end to the military dictator Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year-long reign, political jokes in Egypt were said to temporarily relieve the pressures of political oppression (Shehata, 1992) and to help in enduring it better (Dozio, 2016). Jokes supposedly helped to vent frustrations and provide momentary relief (Zack, 2012, 712/726), so people do not succumb to despair (Marsot, 1971, 6). Some have argued that the Egyptian government had consciously benefited from (Marsot, 1980, 4) or even stimulated (Armbrust, 2008) such satirical criticism as a conservative tactic. It is therefore commonly accepted that, before the 2011 Revolution, "jokes served as a safety valve for society, allowing people to vent about their plight", and that they only fed into a "passive social activism" (Anagondahalli & Khamis, 2014).

During the Revolution, by contrast, the active use of satirical humor in protests online and in Tahrir Square is well-documented. This use of satire fell in line with Christie Davies's criticism of the safety valve theory according to which, "[s]hould there be a shift in the balance of power in favor of the oppressed, far from abandoning their political jokes, they may well make them part of their new and more overt and vigorous forms of resistance" (2007, 302). While scholarship highlights the function of satire as resistance during the Revolution, critics and scholars have argued that it simultaneously kept up the spirits of the protestors. In this respect, Mohamed M. Helmy and Sabine Frerichs argue that satirical humor functions as a "'safety valve' against excessive 'social arousal'" to facilitate close and prolonged gatherings on Tahrir Square (Chapman, 2007, 181 in Helmy & Frerichs, 2013, 466). This use of the safety valve metaphor may try to account for the revolutionary function of satirical humor, but it nonetheless betrays a conservative assumption: satire enables protesters to bear political oppression, but this time while confronting the security state.

Such use of the safety valve metaphor testifies to its ubiquity and persistence. Even scholarship which challenges the conservative upshot associated with safety valve theories often draws on the same metaphor to support its reasoning about satire. So, the argument goes, "perhaps the fact that Egyptians had been joking about Mubarak for 30 years gave them the strength to endure the final stretch of the revolution without care for the possible punishments that awaited them" (Anagondahalli & Khamis, 2014). Although we are sympathetic to the idea that satire had real political affordances during the 2011 Revolution, using the safety valve metaphor in this context still implies the mistaken armchair assumption that satire is a cause which automatically and directly impacts individuals, groups, and political systems. This assumption gives little credit to the social and political circumstances under which satire comes to be meaningfully understood and aesthetically appreciated.

Satire is not a lever which mechanically activates an emotional “safety valve”, thereby directly affecting the “mood” of an entire population. This assumption is mistaken in both pre- and post-Revolutionary in Egypt. While an exhaustive account of the history of Egyptian satire lies outside of our scope, we would like to present three cases from different historical periods to illustrate precisely why the safety valve metaphor is mistaken across temporal contexts - how, in other words, the historicity of satire can break the functionalist understanding underlying the safety valve metaphor. First, consider the following caricature by Salah Jahin, a foremost Egyptian poet and cartoonist whose career began in the 1950s (Image #1). The drawing is part of a series called “Inside the Government’s Offices,” published in a state-owned illustrated weekly magazine called *Sabah el-Kheir* [Good Morning]. This magazine was created in 1956, and it became an important platform for young writers and cartoonists who, while sympathetic to President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s new regime, engaged in social and political critique. Calling Jahin’s satire a safety valve would imply that, through a process of direct and automatic causation, his critique only served to eliminate individual frustrations before these could aggregate into real political action – and thus helped to sustain Nasser’s regime.

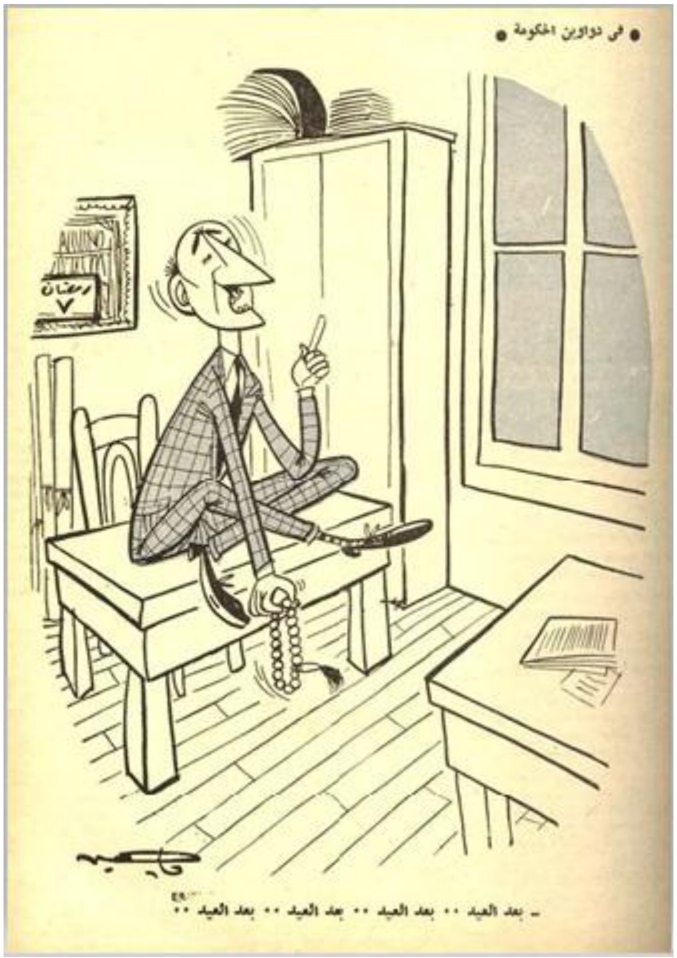
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Figure 1. Image of a satirical caricature.

However, “getting” satirical caricatures like “Inside the Government’s Offices” requires layers of decoding, a process which cannot be equated with an “automatic” and “direct” emotional effect. Concretely, Image #1 shows a bald man with a small moustache wearing a patterned suit and wagging his finger while holding beads in his right hand. Outside the top right caption setting the scene (“inside the government’s offices”), the bottom caption simply attributes the following speech to the character: “After the holidays… after the holidays…” To understand what these minimal cues signify requires a historically situated awareness of implicit assumptions about bureaucratic work in Egypt. This cartoon, in short, criticizes bureaucrats because they procrastinate religiously. The bureaucrat holds a rosary and counts each bead while repeating “after the holidays” as though he were a pious Muslim engaging in the practice of *zikr* or repeated praise to God. Where a pious person would reiterate an expression such as “God is Great” or “There is no god but God,” the bureaucrat repeats “after the holidays” with the same gravitas. The expression, here, means specifically after the Small Eid, a three-day-long official holiday at the end of Ramadan. Jahin reinforces this interpretation by inserting a little calendar in the image’s background indicating “the 7th of Ramadan” – some twenty-odd days before Eid!

The image mocks how bureaucrats greatly postpone their work with the same seriousness as one would evoke the presence of God. This basic narrative interpretation does not hinge on some mechanistic trigger but instead relies on a historicized understanding of “lazy” bureaucratic work combined with subtle religious cues – the rosary, the repetition mimicking *zikr*, the mention of Ramadan. The point is that interpreting satire is perforce historical: it cannot be understood as a series of *a priori* mechanisms which are activated so that someone “gets the joke”. Satire cannot be reduced to a set of given inputs that always produce the same emotional output: it must be puzzled together through historically situated experience. Therefore, framing Jahin’s caricature as just a safety valve against increasing bureaucratization under President Nasser would be a reductive simplification of the complex and historically specific understandings needed to engage with its satire.

Such historicized understandings are crucial to grasp another genre of Egyptian satirical production, which began with the spread of Facebook in the mid-2000s. This genre is locally known as “comics,” but its avatars can be better described as “digital caricatures.” Such caricatures are a special kind of Internet memes, consisting in a collage of captions, drawings, and stills from commercial cinema, television drama, advertising, or videoclips expressing a punctual social or political critique. They are made by both specialist and non-specialist users, and are published on popular Facebook pages such as Egypt’s Sarcasm Society and Asa7be Sarcasm Society. These pages, boasting millions of subscribers in some cases, are among the few media platforms where direct criticisms of the regime are regularly made after the July 2013 coup that brought to power the ex-Minister of Defense and current President, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

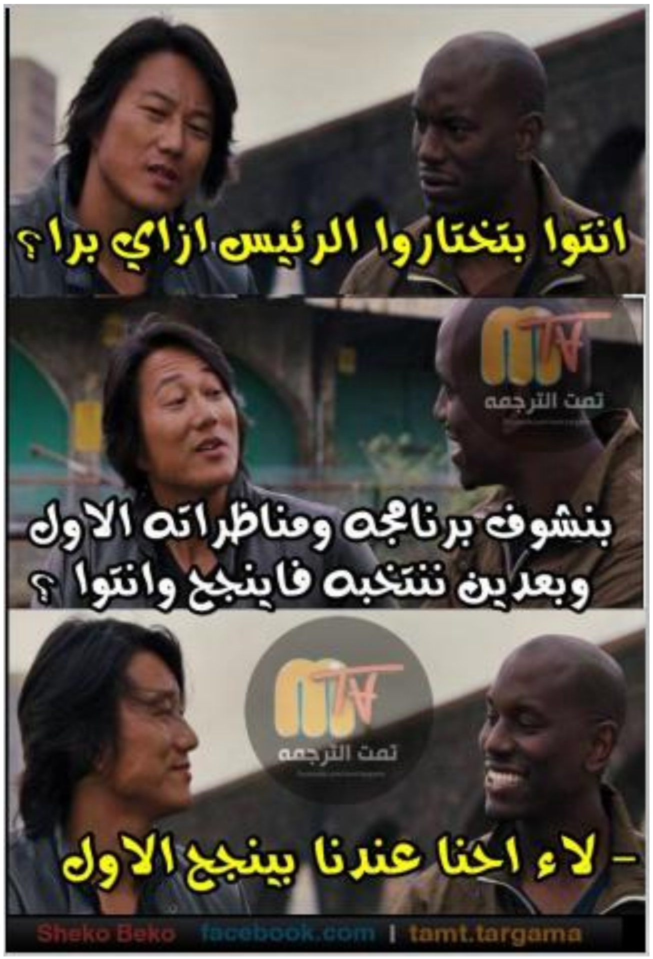
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Figure 2. Example of digital caricature.

Image #2, which was published by the page Tammat al-Targama [Subtitled by…] during Sisi’s electoral campaign in 2014, illustrates the basic features of a digital caricature. The main stills are taken from a scene in *Fast and Furious 6* between actors Tyrese Gibson (to the right) and Sung Kang (to the left). The first guy asks how people outside Egypt choose their president, to which the second guy replies: “There’s a program, some debates, then he gets elected. How about in your country?” The first guy answers back: “In our country, the president gets elected first,” meaning before the program, the debate, and so on. This caricature refers to a major bone of contention in Sisi’s electoral campaign, when his anticipated landslide victory was criticized for the absence of any electoral program or the stalling of electoral debates by Sisi’s camp. This absence prompted the joke in Image #2 (and numerous variations on it) implying that the elections were a sham overall. Again, the visual competence and historical knowledge required to decode this image go well beyond the reasoning implied by framing these memes as a “safety valve” against the possible return to autocratic rule in Egypt.

Thus, while successfully interpreting satire is clearly not an automatic and direct process, the emotional responses that satire generates are equally contingent on a myriad of historical and personal factors. It is not inconceivable that Jahin’s satire of absurd bureaucracy under the Nasser regime or the meme’s satirical take on Sisi’s elections motivated some audiences to try and do something about it. Their efforts may well have failed, but we have no reason to assume *a priori* that the cartoon’s or the meme’s audiences just laughed such absurdity away and resigned themselves to the status quo. And even if some readers responded by making light of Egypt’s bureaucratic or electoral system, so it can be ignored and endured, we should still not say that this satire acted as a safety valve for them. The safety valve metaphor implies that their reaction was a direct and automatic response, while it is really contingent on many historical variables, including an individual's general disposition toward political action or transient mood.

Furthermore, it is equally impossible to predict *a priori* how satire automatically and directly impacts politics and society. A relevant case in post-revolutionary Egypt is the public response to a satirical news show hosted by Bassem Youssef, who is known to American audiences as "Egypt's Jon Stewart" (Gordon & Arafa, 2014; Ibrahim & Eltantawy, 2017). A surgeon who assisted activists during the 2011 Revolution, Youssef began airing a satirical show on YouTube called *B+* in March 2011, which was picked up by the satellite television channels CBC and, later, MBC Egypt under the name *Al-Bernameg* [The Program]. The show achieved its most resounding success using acerbic criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party and President Mohammed Morsi, in power between June 2012 and July 2013. A conscious imitation of Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*, *Al-Bernameg* was discontinued in October 2013 (and again in April 2014) after political pressures on CBC and MBC Egypt.

Youssef's content was powerful, in part, because he satirized the Egyptian President directly – an unthinkable sight on television under Mubarak. For instance, in an episode aired on March 22nd, 2013, Youssef walked on set wearing university regalia and a ridiculously large graduation hat (Al-Bernameg, 2013). In one succinct image, the costume satirized President Morsi's appearance in a ceremony at the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) in Pakistan, where he was awarded an honorary PhD earlier in the week. The show's first segment went on to ridicule some speeches in which President Morsi appeared incoherent, a sight which was attributed by Youssef to his interest in "philosophizing" (given his newly minted PhD). A week later, Youssef was summoned in court for slandering the President, but he was ultimately exonerated. Seven months later, his show was cancelled after the third season premiere on CBC, which introduced a similar satirical treatment of the presidential candidate Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and the Egyptian military. MBC Egypt picked up the show after its cancellation on CBC, but on June 2nd, 2014, Youssef convened a press conference to announce the show's indefinite suspension due to external pressures.

Youssef's case is a typical illustration of how the predictions of the safety valve model are frequently disproven by historical and empirical evidence. Clearly, given its persistence to stop Youssef's show in its tracks, the Sisi regime considered his satire far from harmless (let alone a contribution to sustaining the new status quo). Nevertheless, the safety valve metaphor and associated metaphorical language remain persistent, as Youssef himself demonstrates when expressing disappointment about the political impact of his satire. In February 2014, the Egyptian army (which was under the control of then-defense minister Sisi) announced that it had invented a "Complete Cure Device" to cure all patients of Hepatitis C (which was then the most widespread chronic illness in Egypt) by June 30th, 2014 – and it would also cure AIDS, for good measure. In his show, Youssef extensively satirized this miracle cure. When the sham was revealed, no one was seriously held accountable and the whole affair passed without much media attention. According to Youssef, "this is when I saw how people were treating the program as simple comic *relief*, a way to *vent*, that's all" (2017, 238, emphasis added).

Youssef's comment demonstrates why the endurance and ubiquity of the safety valve metaphor (and associated metaphorical expressions like "venting" and "relief") is so pernicious. This metaphorical thinking introduces the wrong expectations about satire's political impact by framing it in terms of direct and automatic causation. Much like the build-up of steam automatically and directly causes pressure that blows open a safety valve with great force, the reasoning goes that satire has a direct and automatic impact on individual psychology and the political status quo. This perpetuates an absurd "all-or-nothing" reasoning about satire's political impact by introducing the expectation that satire only has an impact when it forcefully causes wholesale disruption of the status quo. When that does not happen – and it invariably never does – satire is then easily dismissed as a harmless "safety valve", which helps people remain "sane", but achieves nothing in the political realm. Such reasoning is absurd. As Oliver Double puts it, "between zero and toppling the government there's a whole range of possibilities" (2020, 168).

Youssef himself has aptly captured the absurdity of this reasoning. After he critiqued Sisi's presidential campaign, some critics claimed that his previous satire of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood was "all part of a deal to vent people's anger through satire" – while, as an exasperated Youssef put it sarcastically, "[o]nly a few months earlier I was the guy who'd toppled the Islamists with his jokes" (2017, 211). Of course, Youssef's impact as a satirist lies somewhere in between. Scholars have argued that satire's political impact is typically indirect and incremental – and cannot be reduced to easily measurable outcomes like voting behavior and election results (see Quirk 2015, 203; Day 2011, 21-23). We should therefore expand our conceptualization of satire's political impact beyond easily measurable outcomes, like salience, knowledge, attitudes and political behavior, to include more subtle outcomes, like joy, enthusiasm, curiosity, and an inner sense of political engagement (Young et al 2014, 1112-1117). The real problem of the ubiquity and endurance of the safety valve metaphor is that it perpetuates a reasoning about satire's political impact which ignores these subtle outcomes in real historical contexts. This is why scholars and critics of satire should stop using the safety valve metaphor and associated metaphors like "venting" altogether.

5 Conclusion

This article argues that the "safety valve" metaphor not only leads to mistaken empirical predictions about the stabilizing effects of satire, but also obfuscates the workings of satire *per se* because it is, overall, a mistaken metaphor. We have first demonstrated how, in spite of numerous criticisms, the metaphor itself is still prevalent in scholarship on satire. We have then provided an extensive account of its reductive account of emotional response and its functionalist understanding of society. These arguments have led us to demonstrate, through selected cases from the history of Egyptian satire, how the use of this ubiquitous yet mistaken metaphor cannot account for the historical richness and thickness of satirical productions, let alone their effects on individuals and broader polities.

Thus, the safety valve metaphor is not just mistaken in its empirical predictions, but it is itself an inadequate metaphor to capture satire and its political effects. This metaphor is both too opaque and too elastic: it obscures the actual working of satire and is commonly applied in a manner so extensible as to foreclose any analytical use. Moreover, the commonplace ubiquity of this metaphor, which is often casually introduced as a transparent "knock-down" argument about satire's political impact, makes it seem as if there is no need for careful historicized research about satire's complex and diverse influence on politics. Comparing satire to a safety valve also ignores that the production and reception of satire is historically situated. To argue that satire acts as a safety valve is not only problematic given the layers of assumed knowledge one must have to interpret it, but also given the political pressures on producers and consumers of satire. There are many nuanced differences between Jahin's caricatures, Tammat al-Targama's memes and Bassem Youssef's show, which do not lie in their ability or inability to act as safety valves, but in the evolving historical contexts in which they are interpreted and become socially efficacious. This historicized lens on satire is necessary to counter mechanistic assumptions about its effects, especially in authoritarian contexts such as contemporary Egypt.

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