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The satirical verses

Making fun of leaders is a pleasure enjoyed by ever more people

POLITICAL jokes travel farther than ever before. Last year the *Onion*, a satirical magazine in America, declared Kim Jong Un, North Korea's round-faced leader, the "sexiest man alive". The *People's Daily* newspaper in China took the nomination seriously and ran a 55-photo spread to celebrate the honour. When the *Onion* published a fake poll announcing that rural white Americans had a more favourable opinion of Iran's then-president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, than of Barack Obama, an Iranian state news-agency covered this as real news. Lots of people are less ingenuously looking at the *Onion* to entertain themselves. In the past year its web traffic has grown by around 70%.

Political satire used to be the preserve of artists and writers like Honoré Daumier, who caricatured King Louis Philippe in 19th-century France, and George Orwell, the author of "Animal Farm". It has existed at least since Aristophanes took aim at the Greek elite in his plays, but thanks to modern technology and a changing political climate it is almost everywhere today. The internet has made it easier for the masses to join in the fun.

Cartoons and lampoons can be posted online, no longer needing a print publication to host them. Social media have helped political sideswipes to spread as contagiously as laughter, and have fostered a “remix culture” in which internet-users share memes and post spoofs with abandon.

The internet has also made it easier for satirists to bypass censors and stay anonymous. The *Pan-Arabia Enquirer*, a Middle Eastern satirical news site, is run by a nameless editor. Satirists enjoy a global reach they never would have had otherwise. Jon Stewart, an American who hosts “The Daily Show”, a humorous news programme on the Comedy Central channel (pictured above), has inspired copycat shows abroad, including one by Bassem Youssef, an Egyptian heart surgeon, who started posting videos on YouTube; they became so popular that he was given a slot on an Egyptian television channel.

Satire is still flourishing where it was born: in theatres. “The Book of Mormon”, a musical making fun of Mormonism, has broken box-office records in America and Britain. But innovation mainly happens online. When Wendy Davis, a Texas state senator, spent 10 hours on her feet filibustering a bill that aimed to restrict abortion, her supporters turned to Amazon, the online retailer, to skewer opponents. One product review of the Mizuno running footwear worn by Ms Davis that day says it “fits perfectly up a Republican’s rear end”. KermlinRussia, a Twitter account, mocks Russian government news releases.

Once such pronouncements were honed in satirical essays. Benjamin Franklin, one of America’s Founding Fathers, gave humorous advice to the British government in 1773 when he penned “Rules by which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One”. Such essays are experiencing a resurgence of sorts. A recent cartoon essay hosted on CNN’s website by Matt Bors about youths facing discrimination from their elders was shared avidly across social media.

In authoritarian countries coded images, rather than words, are a

common form of satirical dissidence, not least because they have a greater chance of evading censors. On the 24th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in June, Weibo, China's microblogging site, was filled with photos of yellow plastic ducks in an empty square in Beijing. They went viral before censors intervened, blocking the phrase "big yellow duck" from search results. When CNN's Turkish channel decided to show a documentary about penguins that month rather than cover big protests in Istanbul's Gezi park, penguins shuffled across social media sites.

New technology is not the only explanation for today's satire boom. Political change, including a worldwide move towards democracy, is helping too. Zeynep Tufekci, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, thinks satire is doing particularly well in the "middle ground"—in countries where freedom of expression is constrained enough to outrage people but where political repression is not so severe as to crush people's ability to communicate relatively freely. Regime change brought about by the Arab spring has sparked a new season of creative and daring cartooning (see [article](#)). According to Andrei Richter of the Moscow Media Law and Policy Institute, a think-tank, the internet may also have made politicians more accustomed to ridicule and less likely to bring charges against satirists, since they can see their competitors are being pilloried too.

Still, many satirists in countries with humourless governments, from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, struggle to express themselves. They are routinely jailed, kidnapped and threatened, says Bro Russell of Cartoonist Rights International, an advocacy group. Some countries are trying to rewrite laws to make it easier to crack down online.

And while the internet may have boosted satire in general, it has also made it harder for practitioners to make a living from it. This is particularly true for professional cartoonists. Their numbers have dwindled as newspapers have gone under or cut

staff. American papers employed around 2,000 full-time editorial cartoonists a century ago. By 2010 only 40 were left; most work is done by freelancers. Their best (and often only) paycheques come from cartoons that sell nationally. Thus local politics now rarely attracts their attention. The most successful cartoonists run their own websites and sell merchandise such as mugs and T-shirts. But that is rarely lucrative. Tjeerd Royaards of the Cartoon Movement, an online publisher, says, “There are more cartoonists in the world, but more part-time cartoonists.”

It is not just politicians who find aspects of the explosion in satire unwelcome. Thanks to the internet, professional purveyors of the stuff face a lot more competition. For once, the joke is at their expense. A niche craft practised by a talented few has turned into a globally popular hobby, and what was once considered audacious commentary is now mainstream. Satirists used to shock people, says Charlie Beckett, a media professor at the London School of Economics. But they have lost impact, no matter how vicious or personal. “Everyone is rude on the internet.”