
Political Cartoons: Now You See Them!

by Rhonda Walker

Sooner or later politicians find themselves the subject of a political cartoon. In the hands of a talented artist the editorial cartoon can be a powerful weapon because the point it is making can be quickly absorbed and transmitted. Nevertheless cartoons are frequently overlooked as a form of political communication. This article suggests that cartoons deserve to be studied and this should be done by taking into account the type of political regimes, forms of media ownership and rules that govern the production of cartoons. When this is done a conclusion emerges that political cartoons, are another means whereby powerful interests reinforce their views on society.

Most people, young and old, have some familiarity with cartoons, from comics and graphic illustrations in books, to the "funnies" and editorial cartoons found in newspapers around the world. Cartoons can amuse, have messages that are pointed and provide a current social commentary on the world around them.

One of the most powerful weapons that a cartoon has is its seemingly innocent humour whose message can be absorbed easily, without much reflection or resistance. But it is the instantaneous manner in which this message is transmitted which ensures the cartoon an important, if often overlooked, prominence in the realm of communications. A cartoon's typical placement in the editorial section, and the fact it is usually produced by the same staff cartoonist, over a long period of time, contribute to the development of themes and central ideas, and provide the impact on the persuasiveness of the medium.

To frame the discussion and explain the importance of political cartoons, it is necessary to consider their history, underlying theories of cartoons and the techniques of persuasion applied. Within the discussion of techniques,

a consideration of the effect of censorship on cartoons and other media will take place in order to further delineate the conceived power of the cartoon image. What cannot be overlooked is the matter of media ownership and the obligations of the cartoonist on staff. It is my thesis that the humorous intervention of a political cartoon does ultimately contribute to the accumulation of information and formulation of public opinion. Humour is employed as a human "equalizer", a tactic which brings everyone to the same level, no matter their ethnicity, class or gender. And, while some have argued that political cartoons provide a vehicle for participation in a climate of voter disillusionment and disenchantment, even disenfranchisement, it is the position of this article that political cartoons are a resource of the dominant, not the minority, and serve to reinforce the opinions of the media ownership and the dominant in society.

A History of Political Cartoons

In Italy, in the sixteenth century, cartooning or *caricatura* emerged in rebellion to "high art" and its wish for prestige¹ with possibly the first cartoons having been painted by Leonardo da Vinci in his study of caricature. While caricature was meant to be a quick, impressionistic drawing that exaggerated prominent physical characteristics to humorous effect, it has also been said to bring out

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the subject's "inner nature". Caricature then, was an early example of graphic satire that could be used as an instrument of suppression, oppression or even emancipation, which "allows the artist to comment on current events and political perspectives".²

Cartoons with an editorial nature emerged as part of the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther 1483-1546. Luther's cartoons were aimed at an illiterate population, but one that was willing to counter authority. His cartoons deflated complicated political debates and portrayed them through the media of printed and disseminated pictures in order to mobilize the support of both the working class and the peasantry to ensure his reforms success.

It took another three hundred years, primarily due to the cost of producing images in newspapers, for cartoons to appear in US newspapers with any regularity. The editorial cartoon had its start in 1884 when Joseph Pulitzer had a political cartoon printed in his New York *World* newspaper, caricaturing a Republican candidate. Pulitzer dramatically changed the face of newspapers by producing his *World* with lively, eye-catching, graphic news illustrations and cartoons. William Randolph Hearst followed suit, and a tradition was established.

Some claim that editorial political cartoons are a form of visual news discourse; others claim they simply offer an absurd account of a current social or political condition. Effectively, a successful cartoon depends on the context of a widely recognized story or person. The most effective artists are acknowledged as those who want to contribute to positive social or political change and often develop their themes and characters over time, even years. Therefore, although the image itself is intended to be instantaneously recognized, the cartoonist, as a staff member, is a standard-bearer for the newspaper and responsible to carry a theme across time and space.

Thus, the humorous intervention of a political cartoon can contribute to the accumulation of information and formulation of public opinion. In addition, they construct social and political issues and offer readers a mini-narrative, or even a replacement narrative that fills the gap on current affairs. Editorial cartoons mainly "lampoon public figures, especially those that remind us of the differences between the haves and the have-nots – our politicians, the rich and the famous, and the businesses and governments they control"³. While cartoons have the appearance of simplicity, it is this very simplicity that disguises the many levels of complexity and agenda found in editorial cartoons. And while newspaper circulation is an influencing factor, the main influence on editorial cartoons appears to be different political regimes which result in different types of graphic satire, low, medium and high. However, politi-

cal cartoons today are not a vehicle for participation by the middle class, although this point is often made.⁴ Therefore, while political cartoons act as a social commentary, these messages are not from the powerless to invoke or instigate change, but from the powerful to maintain the status quo.

A Theoretical Understanding of Cartoons

The difficulty with analysing editorial cartoons is finding the appropriate theoretical frame. There are two approaches that can be used. The first approach uses indicators such as the subject portrayed, the source for the cartoon, the political regime and the corporate relationship, in order to contextualize the relationships between the media ownership, newspaper circulation and political regime. Indicators do not do anything more than identify the subject, the message and the source. And, the concept of tactics, like the use of humour or censorship, or the establishment of meaning over time should not be overlooked or underestimated. Finally, who is *not* satirized is almost as important as who is satirized by editorial cartoons.

A second approach which has been discussed by Raymond Morris⁵, applies four rhetorical devices which are: condensation, by compressing disconnected or complexly-related events into a common, singular frame combination, by artificially juxtaposing different elements or ideas from different places with multiple and diverse meanings; opposition, where everything is reduced to a binary; and, domestication, where distant events are depicted in terms of everyday life.

Devices such as different inscriptions like maps, flags, and certain metaphors, symbolically link what would otherwise be difficult to articulate. "A picture is worth a thousand words; a map is worth ten thousand". Thus, if a map or globe is depicted within the cartoon, it challenges our traditional perceptions of the landscape. This challenge suggests that not everything that we know to be true, is true, and touches on deeply held beliefs. The popular culture approach of political cartoons to the history of our times offers a rich context. When a history of political cartoons is analysed, not only are the politics and players of the time represented, but the mood of at least one segment in society is also represented. In addition, inscriptions like uniforms, bandages, coats of arms, all contribute to meaning at more than one level. Unfortunately, even with these indicators and new levels of meaning, this approach has difficulty answering the questions of who is the target and whose point of view is represented or reinforced.

Morris has tried to respond to the first criticism by defining the viewer who he calls the 'glancer' or 'skimmer'.

But with respect to the point of view represented, the images portrayed draw on public knowledge and reproduce a common-sense view of the world, which is the common-sense world of the cartoonist, as an employee of that particular newspaper. Morris famously compared editorial cartoons and their cartoonists to court jesters of the bourgeoisie. His metaphor of the jester is most appropriate since the court jester mocked rivals to the king, and was always conscious of the source of their own livelihood. However, Morris explained that as power passed from the monarchy to the merchant class, so the role of the jester passed to the caricaturist and later, cartoonist. Today's editorial cartoonists, "work for oligopolistic newspapers and laugh at politics on behalf of business, which by buying advertising space has become the major patron of the newspaper".

Next time you are looking at a political cartoon, apply Morris's "double standard thesis" which in short anticipates that business leaders are generally shown to be serious, orderly and positive while government leaders are generally shown to be foolish, disorderly and ineffective. In my research, the only exceptions I have found to this hypothesis were cases of extreme corporate greed and/or scandal (i.e., Enron). Notably in these cases, cartoonists in fact portrayed the business deviants, and not the corporations themselves. Morris also points out the historical change in political affiliation of political cartoonists. Where once they used to be members of political parties, now most are professionals, free to lampoon all politics, all the time, and not the business sector, to which they belong.

The Political Regime

When studying editorial cartoons, one must acknowledge they more than likely represent the views of the media ownership. As Conrad Black's partner and President of Hollinger, David Radler, said, "There is no departure from media ownership's views" and, "I am ultimately the publisher of all these papers and if editors no longer agree with us, they should disagree with us when they're no longer in our employ".⁶ Even under different political regimes, such as Morocco, and different ownership structures, the press has undergone dramatic censorship, even to the point that newspapers arrived on newsstands with blank or ghost spaces.

The political regime provides a media context that shows up in the cartoons themselves through specific state depictions in terms of family metaphors, a technique commonly intended to generate loyalty amongst the citizenry. Charles Press has also discussed the impact of political regime and maintained that cartoons in "liberal democratic countries tend most often to involve ap-

praisals of state performance, which emphasize the foolishness of government rather than private citizens and corporations".⁷



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In the Western world, the media are privately owned although subject to some state regulation of content with respect to advertising and competition that is usually enforced by a specific state agency, i.e., in Canada, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). In other parts of the world, much of the media is state-owned. In one interview, Hisham Milhem, a former Washington correspondent for the Beirut daily *Al-Safir*, discussed censorship and the Lebanese press. He argued that in contrast to the Western world, in many Arab countries, the main media outlets are operated by the state. He pointed to the case of Lebanon, which although viewed by the US as a democracy with a pluralistic press at arms' length from state control, in fact journalists have been threatened, jailed or killed over their work.⁸ The outward difference between the Beirut newspapers and papers from other Arab states, was ownership. But Milhem makes the point that this ownership is only arms' length from the Lebanese state. He said, "most newspapers are privately owned, but financed by outside states, and sometimes wealthy individuals". And even the Beirut papers that are published in the West, have their content carefully scrutinized to ensure that it does not criticize Saudi Arabia, although the English content does not receive as much censorship as the arabic content.

Techniques of Persuasion

Is an editorial cartoon a form of rebellion? Some have argued that cartoons are an avenue of protest, and indeed cartoonists in their own publications, have argued their work represents their own freedom of expression. Furthermore, their recontextualization of events evokes reference points in a way a photo cannot, therefore assisting in the educating of a population on government policy, i.e., foreign policy. This same argument would hold that cartoons challenge the way we accept official images as real and true. The question is, who are these cartoons directed at, and who is directing them, behind the cartoonist?

My theory is that cartoons provide policy information from the point of view of dominant corporate interests.

Certainly, the cartoon on an editorial page must represent the views of the media ownership, or the cartoonist risks early retirement. And the media in Canada today are owned by recently converged or merged corporations with diverse corporate interests, resulting in a considerable stake in the Canadian economy. Therefore, would it not serve the corporate interest, at times, to offer a slightly patronizing (humorous) view of the government, or at other times, to outright condemn or condone a particular government policy, depending upon whether it is helpful to business interests or not?

Cartoons are graphic editorials, not just illustrations that pass judgement without knowing how much or whether at all they affect public opinion (similar to theories of advertising). And although the newspaper readers of today have a higher literacy rate than Luther's working class, the simplicity and condensed meanings accompanied by a wide latitude of humour allow the political cartoon to escape the censure received by the written word. In these politically and culturally correct times, editorial cartoonists can still draw what editorial writers may not be able to say. Finally, editorial cartoons are encyclopedias of popular culture.

The accepted principles of journalism do not generally allow for the satirizing of the subjects of news articles even though some editorial writers have used the editorial pages as a venue for satire. In contrast, an editorial cartoon is almost always a satiric social commentary. Ultimately it must be emphasized that a political cartoon is a historically constructed image depicted in a very specific context for a specific audience. Also, while most articles try to provide a balanced version of an event, a

political cartoon is wholeheartedly and unabashedly one-sided.

If successful, a cartoon can create what Greenberg refers to as, "metaphoric entrapment" where the cartoon image and real subject are so closely linked that any other interpretation seem impossible.⁹

Cartoons are not limited in the same way as text. Words in an article are usually intended to provide an unequivocal meaning. Cartoons are inscriptions of a moment in time which is best understood during the same period in time illustrated by the cartoon. The more time that passes, the more likely that the cartoon will be understood differently than when it first appeared. On the one hand, the cartoon has an immediate sociological resonance by providing a representation of "now". Remember, it is impossible to view the past. Many symbols in cartoons such as uniforms and machinery of war become quickly unfamiliar with the passage of time. The temporal nature of cartoons, therefore, is also limiting to their longevity, a fact which has led to the underestimation of the power of the political cartoon. This underestimation can be advantageous, since cartooning according to Barajas, is an act of freedom that borders on insanity. And it is this link to insanity that both absolves and frees the cartoonist while rendering the cartoon virtually unchallengeable.¹⁰

Finally, there are a number of limitations that cartoons face, some of which can hinder the cartoon's effectiveness, or at least, soften the 'blow'. Certainly the comprehension of the message does not guarantee its acceptance or endorsement. Also, cartoons are generally seen as a source of entertainment rather than information, and finally, the form of illustration or visual communication itself has received comparatively little analysis in contrast to the level of analysis text has received, which also can be tied in to the lack of visuals used in papers and books in sociology contrasted to science.

Some claim that political cartoons have not received a great deal of scholarly attention because of their use of satire which is seen as "useful, but abject". In defense of satire and cartooning, Barajas maintains that the fundamental principle of cartooning is simple, that the fear of ridicule will modify the subject's behaviour in question, or persuade the subject to change.

Markiewicz states that generally, humor will not change an already-held opinion, and it is difficult to measure humour's effects on comprehension and source evaluation. As well, she found that retention does not appear to be altered by the use of humour. She asserts in her study that over 42% of television advertising uses humour in its messages. This underscores that particular industry's commitment to the idea that humour persuades even in the face of inconclusive results. Spe-

cifically, Markiewicz looked at the use of a satirical form of humour across several studies, and in one particular case, she measured the effect of the addition of a cartoon to a message. Overall, Markiewicz found that humour did not contribute to persuasiveness, nor retention, nor comprehension.¹¹ If this study is to be seen as the most conclusive and thorough study on persuasion (it exceeds the limits of this paper to confirm this point definitively), what conclusions can be drawn about the role of humour in editorial cartoons. If they are not *intended* to persuade the glancer, *what* are they intended to accomplish? Markiewicz helps confirm my hypothesis that persuasion is not the goal of editorial cartoons but that they are essentially an instrument to contain and constrain public opinion for the benefit of major corporate interests.

Words are more easily censored than pictures. And as already stated, political cartoons provide a one-sided, satirical view of an issue, politician or government. In my own cursory survey of political cartoons from around the world, there seemed to be little problem objectifying women (portrayed in US cartoons on the Middle East as belly-dancers or harem girls), or discriminating against other nations with a disturbing Orientalism.¹² What are censored seem to be images that either make the leader of the current political regime look foolish or images that ridicule the dominant religion. This is very difficult to measure and does not account for cases of 'self-censorship' which may be more prominent in authoritarian regimes. For example, in Algeria, there have been cases of self-censorship, to avoid punishment. In Chinese cartoon literature, the "manhua", whose growth was closely linked to political changes and power, has gone through quite an evolution. Originally their targets were political leaders and international relations in the late 1800s. Once China became communist, political cartooning was forced to restrain itself. While there were cartoons that documented the trials and tribulations of the Communist Party in China, more often, daily life was the dominant subject matter. At one point, in fact, officials of the Communist Party actually moved to prohibit any criticism of the Guomindang policies with *The Publication Law of 1937* which instilled a real fear of punishment, even death, and ultimately, self-censorship behaviour.¹³ Some cartoonists, in an effort to avoid the overt censorship of their work, drew animals instead of people to officially disguise their message. Liao Bingxiong, one of China's famous cartoonists, portrayed cats and mice in lieu of individuals to relay his messages in a series entitled, *The Cat Kingdom*.

There are other ways to censor besides outright censorship laws and the instilling of fear to instigate self-censorship. Limiting access to technology and other media beyond state-media can result in a form of censorship.

For example, Moroccans, unlike Algerians, could not retrieve information from outside the state very easily because there was no clear path to European free satellite reception. Algerian citizens, on the other hand, could tap into satellite coverage for free and find out what the world was saying about current events. And this raises another point, that class plays a role in censorship. Only the wealthy had access to purchased satellite coverage in Morocco, but the penny illustrated news was accessible to everyone. Perhaps in some cases a cartoon can impart greater information than television. Both cases would be correct, and depend upon the source or physical location of the media and population. On the one hand, Algeria received free satellite coverage, therefore its citizens would not be as persuaded by the censored press. On the other hand, since there was no free satellite access in Morocco, only the wealthy could afford to find world news that was uncensored. In this case, the middle class would likely be more subject to the persuasiveness of the press and its censored version of current affairs.

While cartoons are less censored than text overall, and even find their way into state-owned media within dictatorships, therefore fulfilling the same goal that these images fulfilled when the world was largely illiterate, censorship is a technique of the state, in contrast to the use of humour, which is a technique of major corporate interests. Thus, the debate between the state and capitalism can be found within the use of these particular two techniques of persuasion.

Conclusion

Editorial cartoons have every appearance of simplicity, but are nothing short of a packed punch. Their many levels of complexity and agendas are only evident when certain theoretical tools are applied to understanding them, the circumstances of media ownership and the political regime in power. And, although they may be non-partisan, they are most-definitely affiliated with corporate interests and whatever those interests may be.

That editorial cartoons are of sociological importance is undoubtable since they provide a visual rhetoric, a "cognitive map" for understanding popular culture and politics, and a venue for "othering" since, in contrast to the written word, they can escape the constraints of political correctness. In addition, editorial cartoons are agenda-setting or contribute to the construction of a normative agenda, the norms of the corporate economy in Western states, and the norms of the king and state in Arab states. Some might argue that an editorial cartoon can present one point of view one day, and another the next, and this would support the argument that cartoons are an instrument of the bourgeois. But, if one considers

that cartoons individually present one side only, and that they are endorsed by the media ownership, and that certain cartoonists are more successful than others, it becomes apparent that they only represent the side to whom their artists owe their livelihoods. And instead of trying to explain the hypodermic needle effect of editorial cartoons, providing a clear analysis of both the political regime and the ownership of the media together clearly has the potential to establish parameters for a study that might actually bear fruit. While it may be an obvious point that there is a direct correlation between the freedom of expression and the political regime, this does not explain the contained power or message of a political cartoon. That these are not altruistic vehicles is a necessary comment and underlined by the fact that cartoonists who hold radical views or do not have wealthy backers (links to major corporate interests) are not successful or widely circulated cartoonists. Further, cartoonists who specialize in drawings on minority viewpoints receive little press support. Thus, political cartoons can be characterized as an instrument of the dominant in society and representative of the interests of the media ownership.

Notes

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