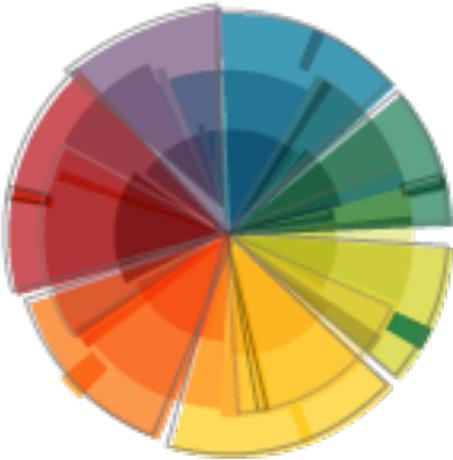




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A Cartoon Is a Deadly Weapon

[Sarah Rothbard \(http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/author/srothbard/\)](http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/author/srothbard/) | March 7, 2015 (2015-03-07T00:01:50-0700)

Why simple drawings can spur unrest, fatwas, and shootings. Co-published with [Zócalo Public Square \(http://zocalopublicsquare.org/\)](http://zocalopublicsquare.org/).



Black-Booker in Kartinki—voina russkikh s nemtsami (Pictures—The Russian War with the Germans), 1914. Hand-colored lithograph. The Getty Research Institute, 92-F293

Cartoons make us laugh. But they can also make us feel anger and powerlessness, fear and loathing. In early January, Al-Qaeda gunmen unleashed a brutal attack on the offices of the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in retaliation for cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad.



[\(http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/tags/open-art/\)](http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/tags/open-art/)This wasn't the first time *Charlie Hebdo* had been targeted, and other 21st-century cartoonists have faced similar threats. Cartoons have played a part in cultural and political clashes for hundreds of years, and have enraged politicians from Tammany Hall's Boss Tweed to Adolf Hitler. Why do simple line drawings, sometimes accompanied by a caption, have so much sway? In advance of the **Zócalo/Getty Open Art event [Can Cartoons Start Wars?](http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/event/can-cartoons-start-wars/)** (<http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/event/can-cartoons-start-wars/>), inspired by the current Getty Research Institute exhibition [World War I: War of Images. Images of War](http://www.getty.edu/WWI/) (<http://www.getty.edu/WWI/>), we asked cartoonists, as well as scholars and writers who have studied their work: What is it about cartoons that gives them such power? What do they allow artists to do that they couldn't do otherwise?

Mark Alan Stamaty

Going to your gut

Cartoons go right to the gut. They're visceral. They combine two powerful languages—verbal and visual. They have, in image and lettering, an infinite array of possibilities of expression. They can cut through the clutter with their potential simplicity and power. They're infinitely flexible. They can be FUN. We associate them with childhood feelings of excitement, happiness, and laughter. Most of us have happy memories of cartoons.

There's an immediacy in cartoons. They can be refreshing. They're easily accessible. They speak to our animal brain. Yet they can carry the most complex and sophisticated meanings and messages. Cartoons can convey emotion and concept very directly and vividly from the cartoonist to the viewer-reader. The visual element allows for quick reception and, often, deep penetration into the emotional depths of the viewer-reader. Because I feel the power of cartoons is so undeniably self-evident, I feel almost silly here, trying to explain why. I feel like drawing. Just drawing. And writing whatever words come with it. Without thinking. Just POW!

Take THAT!!! Which is what a cartoonist does. FEELS and puts pen to paper and POW! BANG! SLAM! Take THAT! and THAT! and THAT!!! And don't ask me to explain it. Just ask your GUT, your HEART, and your deepest visceral, primordial receptors what it "means."

Mark Alan Stamaty is the author-illustrator of books for children and adults, including *Who Needs Donuts?* and *Shake, Rattle & Turn That Noise Down!* He is also the creator of many comic strips, including *MacDoodle St.*, *Washington*, *Doodlennium*, and *Boox*.

Victor S. Navasky

A mix of public humiliation, neuroscience, and getting at the truth beneath the surface

Nobody knows what is it about cartoons, which are generally thought of as silly, trivial, and irrelevant that gives them the power to incite murder, worldwide protests, censorship, imprisonment, and all the rest.

Here, for what it's worth, are five theories:

1. They are unavoidable, and as such can be a form of public humiliation. As Boss Tweed famously said about Thomas Nast's brilliant caricatures, it didn't matter what the press wrote about him: "My constituents can't read, but they can't help seeing them damned pictures."
2. And even for people who can read, visual language often edges out verbal language in its power to influence us. If you don't believe me, read the scholar W. J. T. Mitchell's book, *What Do Pictures Want?*
3. Neuroscientists' experiments on rats and herring gull chicks have "proven" that animals react to exaggerated stimuli the way humans react to caricature—which is something called "peak shift effect."
4. A more accessible theory was offered by the great British cartoonist David Low, whose cartoons often mocked Hitler as ineffectual (one showed him as a spoiled brat having a tantrum)—and thus caused a frenzy in Germany: "No dictator is inconvenienced or even displeased by cartoons showing his terrible person stalking through blood and mud. That is the kind of idea about himself that the power-seeking world-beater would want to propagate. ... What he does not want to get around is the idea that he is an ass, which is really damaging."
5. Finally I might mention my personal theory: If one objects to an editorial, one can always write a letter to the editor, even if only in one's head. But if one objects to a cartoon, and especially caricature, which by definition is an unfair exaggeration, there is no such thing as a cartoon to the editor—all of which can make the victim feel impotent and therefore enraged.

Moreover, there may also be the unstated fear that the caricaturist has captured the truth beneath the surface. Unlike the portraitist, as the Austrian art historian Ernst Gombrich wrote, “The caricaturist does not seek the perfect form, but the perfect deformity. To penetrate through the outward appearance to the inner being in all its ugliness.”

Victor S. Navasky is the author of, among other books, *The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power*. He teaches at Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism where he chairs the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Reza Farazmand

Breaking down ideas into a simple, shareable form

A cartoon is an idea broken down to a simpler form. It is digestible and uncomplicated. It is a quick read offered up in an efficient structure. It does away with elaborate sentences and blocks of text in favor of an image, a few words, and a clear sentiment. The best cartoons sidestep words completely, communicating a message through the universal language of pictures.

A cartoon is approachable. It invites the reader into a version of our world portrayed in lines, colors, and exaggerated features. A cartoon is fun and playful, but often deceptively so, wrapping a deeper message or a darker strand of humor in a layer of vibrant imagery. This stark and unexpected contrast is a powerful tool, catching the reader off guard and tilting perceptions for just long enough to drive home an idea in that brief moment of surprise and uncertainty.

The digital age has made cartoons stronger than ever. Their compact form fits perfectly into the social media feeds and image-dominated content aggregators where we spend so much of our time. They are easily shared, readily reposted, and prone to mass distribution and popular appeal in a way that an essay or an article never will be. The cartoon is a style of communication that will maintain its relevance and its accessibility regardless of medium or technology, lending it a timeless power to communicate ideas in an elegant and engaging way.

Reza Farazmand is a cartoonist and writer best known for his webcomic *Poorly Drawn Lines*. His first book, *Poorly Drawn Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories*, is forthcoming. He lives and draws in San Francisco.

Todd DePastino

Scrappy subjectivity that reinforces or challenges the established order

People think pictures are objective, and words manipulative. But cartoons are born of strong points of view, aiming either to reinforce or challenge the established order. In fighting for their causes, they gauge the eyes, hit below the belt, and indulge in every cognitive bias, logical fallacy, and false form of argumentation they can. Their scrappy subjectivity is both their weakness and their strength.

“A cartoon cannot say, ‘On the other hand,’ and it cannot defend itself,” says cartoonist Doug Marlette. “It is a frontal assault, a slam dunk, a cluster bomb.” Good cartoonists are touchy and thin-skinned. They get their backs up and take umbrage easily. It’s never business, always personal.

“I set everything that happens in the world against my own standards of what I think is right and wrong,” said one of the greatest American cartoonists, Bill Mauldin. “Anyone who was authoritarian-minded didn’t like what I did,” Mauldin once said of his World War II cartoons that infuriated the likes of General George Patton, adding that, properly read, his wartime cartoons “incited soldiers to mutiny.”

Unlike symphonies or sculptures, movies or plays, cartoons are cheap to produce and distribute, and they can be created and recreated daily. If a cartoonist doesn’t hit her mark the first time, she can try again and again, until the drawing meets the flesh. When Thomas Nast lambasted the corruption of Tammany Hall in *Harper’s Weekly’s* in 1871, he didn’t draw just one cartoon about Boss Tweed. He drew 50.

Like words, however, cartoons are supple enough to depict the intangible in a way that photographs rarely can. What would a photograph of the war on terror look like? Or the First Amendment? Great cartoonists translate political and social abstractions into discrete visual representations that hit people where they live and influence how they view the world.

Todd DePastino is author of *Bill Mauldin: A Life Up Front* and several other books. He is founder and executive director of the *Veterans Breakfast Club*, a nonprofit that gathers veterans to share their stories with the public.

Patrick Chappatte

You take a cartoon to the face

The attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and in Copenhagen have put the art of cartooning at the center of the world’s attention. How could caricatures trigger demonstrations? How could people get killed for drawing? What is the power of that seemingly simple, “innocent” thing, a cartoon?

Cartoons are powerful because they short-circuit thinking and reasoning. There's a primal, childish power in a simple pencil stroke. You take a cartoon in the face before you have time to understand it. The language of images is a potent shortcut, and it doesn't need translations. At the same time, a drawing is often ambiguous, open to interpretation. Humor requires boundaries. A joke is something you share with an audience. But now, something drawn or written in your little corner of the world can be seen in the streets of Peshawar, Lagos, and Jakarta. Huge, deadly misunderstandings are almost guaranteed. We may be witnessing the first conflict of globalization, and it's a cultural one.

Cartoons have ended up at the center of a conflict fueled by extremists. But we don't want cartoons or cartoonists to be taken hostage, to be used by one camp against the other. We live in an open world with closed minds. So how do we move from here? Democracies can't accept curbing freedom of speech, which is sacred to them, just as dogma is sacred to the faithful. And I doubt that we will come up with a single, global sense of humor. But we can defend freedom of expression in a spirit of dialogue. Artists should be able to criticize while listening at the same time. We must stand behind independent, responsible, professional cartoonists, everywhere. Every society needs these critical voices. Humor is what helps us process the horrors and idiocies of the world. In this day and age, we need it more than ever.

Patrick Chappatte is editorial cartoonist and comics reporter for *The International New York Times*. Also see "[The Power of Cartoons \(http://www.ted.com/talks/patrick_chappatte_the_power_of_cartoons\)](http://www.ted.com/talks/patrick_chappatte_the_power_of_cartoons)" by Patrick Chappatte on TED.com.

James MacLeod

Nobody likes being laughed at

Cartoons have such power because they provoke laughter and invite the viewer to participate in the mockery of a person or an idea. Nobody likes to be laughed at, and to be mocked, especially by a group, is a deeply unsettling experience. Cartoons work best when they are deployed against those who have power, so they put the powerful in what is for them not just an unsettling but an unfamiliar position.

I think also that we respond to apparently simple images because we are wired to do so. We were drawing pictures on cave walls 30,000 years before we had written language, and these cave paintings still have the capacity to astonish and inspire us. Somewhere deep in our brains lies this ancient primal response to simple line drawings, and that is what kicks in when we are outraged by a cartoon, in print or online.

Good cartoons distill a great deal of content into an apparently simple form. People, arguments, ideologies, and religious views can be critiqued and dismissed with a few strokes of the cartoonist's pen, and they can also be consumed very quickly. The viewer doesn't have to read a complex argument, she merely has to look at a picture—sometimes one that has no words at all—and get the message almost instantly. This speed of absorption is what makes cartoons such a precious commodity in our cultural and political discourse.

All this makes cartoonists powerful figures, with the potential to change minds and alter debates. It gives cartoonists a place at the table when great issues are being decided. And it places cartoonists in the front line of almost every meaningful battle of ideas in our time.

James MacLeod is a professor of European history at the University of Evansville and an editorial cartoonist for the Evansville Courier and Press; his cartoon in response to the Charlie Hebdo shootings was reproduced all over the world. He is currently writing a book on the American cartoonist Karl Knecht, and his daily cartoons can be seen at www.fb.com/macleodcartoons (<http://www.fb.com/macleodcartoons>).

Vishavjit Singh

Making neural connections in a split second

I know the power of cartoons firsthand not as a cartoonist but as someone who started cartooning in response to a single cartoon, published in 2001, titled "Find the Terrorist" by Mark Fiore. Fiore's animated cartoon featured rotating images of men—a Sikh, a Latino, a Muslim, an Anglo—and asked the reader to click on the one committing terrorist acts. The cartoon captured my predicament as a turbaned and bearded American in the aftermath of 9/11. Its power lay in how it captured the edge of a fine line between contradiction and reality, truth and fiction, imagination and misperception.

The image by itself is not what captures the heart in any cartoon. It's the neural connections that a cartoon enables the viewer to make in a split second.

Words, poems, and essays can capture the cracks in our reality, but it takes a while for the reader to get there. The punch of a cartoon is special; it feels like your neurons have exploded and all your senses are on alert—as if they're newscasters running to cover a violent incident.

After Mark Fiore's cartoon exploded my neurons, I became a cartoonist drawing turbaned and bearded Sikhs around the globe with my right index finger and computer pad. Then, many years later I illustrated a new kind of superhero—one I also play in costume across the U.S. With these cartoons I hope to take viewers outside their usual perspective boxes and discover other dimensions of reality around us.

Cartoons capture the obvious in a new light, expose what our clouded perceptions hide, at times reinforce our beliefs, and sometimes change lives. That is the power of the cartoon.

Vishavjit Singh is the first turbaned and bearded editorial cartoonist in the U.S. By day he is a software analyst, and by nights/weekends he creates turbanful Sikh cartoons that can be consumed at [Sikhtoons.com](http://www.Sikhtoons.com) (<http://www.Sikhtoons.com>). He can be reached at @sikhtoons and vsingh at sikhtoons dot com.

Ilan Danjoux

Personifying threat and reducing conflicts to binary clashes of interest

Political cartoons have long been mobilized for war, revolution, and genocide. Their use in rallying support for both world wars, delegitimizing leaders during the Arab Spring, and dehumanizing Jews and Tutsis prior to the Holocaust and Rwandan genocide explains the fear and foreboding they elicit among those ridiculed, demonized, and ostracized. Attempts to litigate, legislate, and intimidate cartoonists into silence, however, misconstrue their influence and the role they play in conflict.

Editorial cartoons are neither persuasive nor informative enough to incite violence. They make sense of conflict by visually analogizing its issues and actors to historic precedent, cultural narratives, and religious parables. The background knowledge required to decipher their metaphoric arguments make them incomprehensible to community outsiders. Warnings of Orwellian surveillance or Munich agreements are impervious to those unfamiliar with science fiction writing and European history. Even readers who are able to make sense of their message may not be swayed by cartoon commentary. With no space for discursive reasoning or evidentiary support, allegations of malice, malfeasance, and danger will not turn doves into hawks. Cartoons only corroborate or validate suspicions already held by readers.

This does not mean cartoons do not aggravate conflict. Their unsubstantiated and uncorroborated claims can accentuate the most tenuous and dubious of conspiracy theories and existential threats. The cartoon's need for visual efficacy encourages cartoonists to personify threat and reduce conflicts into a binary clash of interests. Easily identifiable rivals that embody danger become acceptable targets for political violence. This can serve to exacerbate political fault-lines by both reinforcing xenophobic fears and confirming the suspicions of targeted communities. The anti-Semitic imagery in Arab cartoons that preceded the 1967 Six Day War left little doubt in the minds of many Israelis of looming danger. In this way, cartoons are not instigators but accelerants of conflict.

Ilan Danjoux was a visiting professor of Israel studies at the University of Calgary. His book, *Political Cartoons and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, examines the cartoon's ability to anticipate outbreaks of violence.