

Article: “Reconsidering the Decline of the Editorial Cartoon”
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Reconsidering the Decline of the Editorial Cartoon

Originating in the late nineteenth century, the editorial cartoon began as a mutually beneficial partnership between cartoonists and publishers. Publishers hoped to capitalize on the cartoon's popularity to increase revenue while cartoonists received job security and access to broad audiences. Recently, the future of the editorial cartoon in the United States has been a topic of much debate. Monitoring the decline of employment opportunities, growing editorial controls, and the greater use of syndication gives the impression of a medium in decline. Matt Davies, the head of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists (AAEC), recently stated that in any given interview he is "invariably asked about the demise of the editorial cartoonist" (Nieman 2004, 6).

While acknowledging the challenges facing editorial cartoonists today, this paper argues that the apparent decline of the editorial cartoon should not be misconstrued with the erosion of the political cartoon itself. Historic and recent examples demonstrate the continued ability of the political cartoon to draw attention, spark controversy, and trouble leaders across the globe. Exploring the rise of new

media alternatives, this work stresses that the fate of the political cartoon has never been, nor need be, bound to that of the newspaper. As the challenges for editorial

cartoonists mount, the potential of the Internet to offer cartoonists affordable access to broader audiences free of editorial controls has led some to question the continued merit of the editorial cartoon compromise.

The Emergence of the Editorial Cartoon

In the history of the caricature, the editorial cartoon stands as an anomaly. The first known political cartoon emerged in Egypt around 1360 BC in which an unknown artist lampooned Ikhnaton, the unpopular father-in-law of Tutankhamen. This marked one of numerous satirical attacks on ancient Egyptian leaders that ranged from Cleopatra to low-level government officials (Moyle 2004). Caricatures have also been found on Ancient Greek pottery depictions that lampooned both political leaders and overweight Olympian gods. Political discontent in the Roman Empire appeared scrawled on walls, mocking strict or incompetent military commanders as well as fringe religious movements. Ancient Indian rulers were

no less immune to caricatures that attacked political elites and their Hindu gods (Lester 1995, 219). What is significant in these manifestations is that these cartoons were produced independent of editorial control or profit motive and appeared on a variety of mediums other than newsprint.

The invention of the printing press profoundly changed the political cartoon. Printing led to the emergence of the broadsheet, which circulated throughout Renaissance Europe. Broadsheets were loose-page editorial productions designed for mass consumption. They offered readers a synopsis and analysis of current events, employing both caricature and visual metaphors (Göçek 1998, 3). The use of caricatures expanded the appeal and profitability of their product making it more easily understood, widely accessible, and a highly entertaining form of political analysis. For the cartoonists, the broadsheet provided access to larger audiences along with a source of income, however sporadic.

Despite their potential profitability, broadsheets were an expensive enterprise, which resulting in intermittent production, poor distribution, and limited runs (Duus 2001, 965). Print runs could vary from several dozen to a few thousand. The high production cost further restricted broadsheets' subject matter to issues deemed important or popular enough to justify the necessary expenditure (Press 1981, 37). Because the expense of production was passed onto consumers, the subject matter often targeted elite interests and concerns, with many of the metaphors employed by cartoonists referencing the knowledge base of the educated few (Duus 2001, 966).

Technological innovation in printing led to economies of scale that ultimately gave birth to the modern editorial cartoon. Steady improvements in printing technology increased press runs and image quality while lowering the cost of production (Press 1981, 49). This resulted in a proliferation of visual satire in the nineteenth century (Duus 2001, 965). Broadsheets were gradually incorporated into the burgeoning newspapers of Europe and the United States as editorialized commentary to the reported news. The editorial cartoon compromise emerged as part of this consolidation. Cartoonists were offered broader distribution and a steady flow of income. In return, cartoonists grudgingly accepted editorial scrutiny and production deadlines.

This transformation from broadsheet production to daily paper had a profound impact. As the new editorial cartoonist was commissioned to produce daily or weekly commentary, he

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ceased to be an independent commentator. "No longer did production occur when the spirit moved the artist" (Press 1981, 44). Artistic freedom waned as cartoonists fell under the auspices and influence of larger editorial teams (Gilmartin 1998, 535). Cartoonists who could not consistently produce satire that appealed to readers soon found themselves unemployed. For those who could, a golden age of cartooning would follow (Lamb 2004, 70).

Relevance of the Political Cartoon

Editorial pressure, however, did not mean that editorial cartoonists avoided controversy or failed to challenge audiences. While generally targeting leaders, the cartoonist's impact cuts clear across society. On a 1999 visit to the United States, the Anti-Defamation League presented Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, with a book of anti-Semitic cartoons that appeared in the Egyptian press. When challenged to explain his government's alleged complicity, rather than dismiss the accusation he responded by presenting a compilation of anti-Arab cartoons drawn by Israeli artists (Kallaugher 1999). More recently, the outrage, boycotts, riots, death threats, arsons, and murders that followed *Jyllands-Posten's* publication of 12 cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammed visibly underscored the relevance attributed the cartoonist's pen.

Nonetheless, political leaders bear the brunt of cartoonist attacks. Boss Tweed's cry to stop "them damn pictures" and former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's cancellation of the newspaper *Davar* demonstrate their ability to touch the rawest of nerves at the highest levels of government. The attention leaders pay to political cartoons may stem from their well-documented association with political turmoil and revolution. Fatma Müge Göçek (1998, 4) cites the widely circulated political cartoons in France for hastening the French Revolution, "by constantly deriding the French king and his court and by venerating new Republican symbols." Katz (2004, 44) credits Paul Revere's brutal imagery of the Boston Massacre for stoking the seeds of the American Revolution. Streicher (1967, 427) recounts the role of the medium in the 1848 German Revolution. The relentless derision of government corruption by cartoonists preceded the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy (Marsot 1971, 2). Hung attributed the cartoon a role in the outbreak of the Chinese Revolution (Hung 1994, 122); Alba emphasized their role in the Mexican Revolution while Brummett (1995, 434) cited their part in the 1908 Turkish Revolution.

It is the ability of cartoons to undermine the legitimacy of rulers, leaving an indelible stain on their public image, that remains one of their most potent and feared attributes. Leaders are acutely aware that what most people see is "not their official portraits but their newspaper caricatures" (Duus 2001, 966). Whether it was Charles Philipon's casting of the French King Louis-Philippe as a pear (Moyle 2004, 55) or Richard Nixon's lament to an advisor that he had to erase Herblock's image from the American consciousness (Lamb 2004b, 19), leaders often struggle to undo the typecasting thrust upon them by cartoonists (Lester 1995, 224–5). As Buell (1988, 847) states, "as long as editorial cartoonists have caricatured politicians, politicians have feared for their public image."

Most leaders consider the cartoon's ability to undermine political legitimacy a genuine threat. Consequently, the history of the political cartoon is shadowed by attempts to silence their artists. Both Aristotle and Aristophanes describe the torture of a cartoonist named Pauson for his attack on Greek leadership (Moyle 2004, 50). French artist Honoré Daumier was sentenced to jail for his satirical derision of King Louis Philippe and the aristocracy (Othman 2000). Adolf Hitler ordered that the name of English cartoonist David Low be put on the Gestapo's list of

people to be exterminated (Lamb 2004, 40). More recently, Kurdish cartoonist Dogan Guzal was sentenced to 16 months in high-security prison in August 1998 for depicting his government as weak (Kallaugher 1999). One of the most famous silencing of a political cartoonist was the assassination of Naji Ali in 1987 for his criticism of Arab and Palestinian leaders (Lynfield 2001, 2).

These attempts are not only limited to the arrest, torture, and murder of the cartoonists themselves. Newspapers and editors are also targeted. In 1995, 30 armed members of the Preventive Security entered the print shop of Palestinian newspaper *Al Uma* and confiscated the plates of an unflattering caricature of Palestinian Leader Yasser Arafat. When the Khatibs, owners of the paper, complained and appealed to human rights groups, the offices of newspaper were burned to the ground, never to be reopened (Ben Efrat 1998, 2). In 2006, the Iranian cartoonist Mana Neyestani's cartoon of May 19, which sparked riots by the country's ethnic Azeris when it depicted a cockroach speaking in Azeri, led to the closure of the paper *Iran Friday* and the arrest of Editor-in-Chief Mehrdad Qasemfar by the Press and Information Department of the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry (CPJ 2006).

These responses are not restricted to non-democratic societies. In the United States, both Pennsylvania and California have, at one time, outlawed the production of political cartoons (Lamb 2004, 72). American cartoonist Paul Conrad achieved fame when Nixon placed him on his "enemies list" (Katz 2004, 46). More recently, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, cartoonists have endured unusual scrutiny. Presidential Press Secretary Ari Fleischer's condemnation of a cartoon criticizing President George W. Bush led to the firing of the editor of a New Hampshire newspaper. Similarly, the *New York Times* recently fired cartoonist Ted Rall from its web site because of his harsh criticism of the Bush administration (Lamb 2004b, 18). If the relevance of the editorial cartoon need be measured, it can be done against the efforts taken to silence them.

Occasionally, both governments and elites have attempted to harness the medium's power for political ends. Napoleon reportedly encouraged French artists to create cartoons that sanctioned his policies (Lester 1995, 222). Both the Central and Allied forces in World War I commissioned cartoonists to demonize the enemy and glorify the struggle in order to boost public support on the home front (Göçek 1998, 5). During the Spanish-American War, American newspaper baron William Hearst asked artists "to draw cartoons of fake Spanish atrocities to whip up support for a war against Spain" (Lester 1995, 224). More recently, in 2006, the Israeli military intelligence department created political cartoons depicting Hezbollah as a snake that threatened the existence of Lebanon to accompany leaflet drops over Southern Lebanon (Issacharoff 2006).

Reconsidering the Decline

It is within this context that the decline of the editorial cartoon must be considered. Despite the documented decline of full-time editorial cartoonists across the United States from nearly 200 in the 1980s to fewer than 90 today, the political cartoon continues to resonate among both readers and political leaders (Marlette 2004, 21). The origins of the decline, ironically, stem from the very elements that led to the editorial cartoon compromise in the first place: technological innovation combined with the corporate interests of newspapers. While incorporating cartoons began as a way for newspapers to attract audiences, the growth of media outlets into media empires have made editors accountable to a broader and more diverse consumer base. From the outset, the task of the publisher has

always been to ensure that the cartoonist's message related to, or at least did not offend, the bulk of their readers (Lamb 2004, 40). It does not make good economic sense to alienate or insult one's customers. This expanded readership placed increased pressure on cartoonists to avoid insulting increasingly larger segments of the general population.

The rise of corporate media conglomerates also coincided with the emergence of electronic communication that simultaneously increased the availability of cartoon syndication while reducing the costs. This had a profound impact on the editorial cartoonist. As Stantis (2004, 37) explains, prior to the last decade, syndicated cartoons often took days to arrive via courier, far too long a delay for any reputable newspaper to wait before commenting on unfolding events. The arrival of digital production and delivery gave editors access to a wide selection of syndicated cartoons, reducing their dependence on their own cartoonists. Eventually, the need to keep a staff cartoonist on the payroll became less economically convincing. The twin benefits of cutting costs while avoiding controversy, something cartoonists are invariably good at stirring up, proved extremely appealing to the corporate-minded editor (Ozga 2005, 5).

The increasing reliance on syndication impacted the content of the editorial cartoon as well. Cartoonists seeking to profit from syndication sanitize their commentary for wide audience appeal. This has led to the dilution of the craft with an increase in cartoons that seek to make people laugh rather than make them think (Lamb 2004, 27). It is the reduced number and eroding quality of the editorial cartoon that has led many to lament the decline of the editorial cartoon. Yet editorial cartooning has experienced significant challenges before. The shift from partisan newspapers to objective reporting in the 1920s greatly eroded the prestige once associated with the craft, evident in the reduction of cartoon size and prominence within the newspaper. Similarly, a 1957 article titled "The Rise and Fall of the Political Cartoon" that predicted the medium's demise was instead followed by a golden era of cartoon production.

While the challenges facing editorial cartoonists are not new, the difference today is in the delivery of the medium: where previously a newspaper constituted the most effective way to access a mass audience, the emergence of the Internet has altered this reality. If media conglomeration and electronic syndication served to simultaneously dull the cartoonists' message while reducing employment opportunities, new media out-

lets may well provide what newspapers editors had once offered their broadsheet predecessors: cheaper access to broader markets. The political cartoon's ability to convey complex messages succinctly appears ideally suited to the age of instant messaging.

Making the transition to a digital medium will invariably come with some economic risk. Yet, with newspapers increasingly unable or unwilling to provide cartoonists the economic security they once promised, the benefits of being anchored to a newspaper are becoming less convincing. "With the rise of the Internet over the past decade, cartoonists have begun to ask if their fate must be tied to that of newsprint" (Trostle 2004, 11). The Internet may well offer the best response to the watering down effect of syndication and squeezing out effect of corporatization.

The affordability and freedom offered by the Internet has already impacted the industry. Cartoonists are increasingly using the Internet to circumnavigate editorial controls and publish cartoons rejected by their papers. Clay Bennett, a cartoonist for the *Christian Science Monitor*, states that every time one of his pieces is rejected, he deletes the paper's name and posts the rejected cartoon on his web site (Lamb 2004, 175). The Internet has also facilitated the proliferation of new artists who have benefited from considerably lowered barriers to entry. Instead of an alternative to newspaper publication, some cartoonists have already embraced the new medium's unrestricted access to global audiences. Mark Fiore (2004, 41), who has successfully made the transition, states that the "terrible experience as a staff cartoonist was the best thing that ever happened to my career." Another such pioneer is Milt Priggee, author of the animated electronic cartoon *Coffins*, which tracks the names of editorial cartoonists recently fired by newspaper outlets. Significantly, he monitors this decline from the safety of the digital frontier, stating: "the door that is opening is the Internet, the digital world" (Ozga 2005, 5).

While the future of the editorial cartoon may be uncertain, the future of the political cartoon, especially in its digital form, has never seemed brighter. As Plante (2004, 13) states, cartoonists "have never enjoyed more readership." With newspapers no longer the best means of distribution, eroding job security, and increasing editorial control, it is the merit of the editorial cartoon compromise that appears most uncertain. Thus instead of mourning the twilight of the editorial cartoon, it may be time to welcome the dawn of its digital alternative.

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