

Satire's conflicting kinship with journalism

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So 12 are dead in Paris, with more injured. Their crime is an association with the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, which ridicules popes, politicians, prophets and Islamic extremists. It comes down to this. The magazine was eager to publish words and images that fanatics hated. Symbols were met with bullets.

The pen is mightier than the sword, we say, but is it mightier than the automatic rifle, the rocket launcher, the Molotov cocktail, the dirty bomb in a terrorist's briefcase? Should journalists and satirists work in bunkers?

Journalism is a dangerous business, requiring physical and moral courage. Just [look at what has happened to our war correspondents this past year](#). The events in Paris have demonstrated that satire is as powerful as journalism – and just as dangerous.

There are forms of satire contained in journalism, such as political cartoons and humor columns. Some forms of satire clothe themselves in the trappings of journalism, such as the Colbert Report, the Daily Show, and The Onion.

But journalism and satire are, in many ways, opposites. Good journalism has many boundaries; satire few. Good journalism practices proportionality and decorum; satire spits on them. Good journalism appeals to reason; satire tweaks the funny bone or socks the solar plexus.

Yet journalists have a huge stake in satire. Satirists stake out the territory within which all creative humans can exercise their arts. The First Amendment, it has been often said, would not be necessary to protect common speech. We have it to protect extreme, unpopular, even dangerous forms of expression. That right to free expression is not absolute, of course. It comes with responsibilities, one of which is to consider the consequences of publication.

You can't yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater, unless that theater is on fire. The creators of *Charlie Hebdo* yelled against fanaticism at the top of their lungs.

Nelson Poynter, creator of the Poynter Institute and former owner of the St. Petersburg Times, would not hire an editorial cartoonist. His argument was this: the editorial writer would work hard to craft an argument to make a subtle point. Behind that writer was the cartoonist, wielding a hammer. Mr. Poynter was right, I believe, in drawing a sharp distinction between journalism and satire, but he was wrong in one important sense.

Responsible journalism and responsible satire (if that is not an oxymoron) can share the same, or at least a harmonic, mission and purpose. Both forms stay alert to what is happening in the world. Both should attend to the abuse of power and the threats to the public good, whether they come from criminal elements, corporations, bureaucracies,

celebrities, or governments. Journalists fulfill their mission with the accumulation and verification of evidence. Satirists use some of that same evidence but apply the strategies of irony, hyperbole, parody, inversion, juxtaposition, and caricature, making the corrupt a target of ridicule.

Nazi filmmaker Leni Reifenstahl used some of the most sophisticated cinematic strategies of her time to create "[Triumph of the Will](#)," the ultimate deification of Hitler and the Third Reich. Charlie Chaplin saw that film and imagined his own parody in "[The Great Dictator](#)," a devastating deflation of Nazi mythology, and one of the most popular movies of its time leading up to World War II. In hindsight, Chaplin wrote in his [autobiography](#) that he would never have made the movie, in which he plays a Jewish barber, if he had known about the concentration camps, what we now call the Holocaust. He would not have wanted to inadvertently enflame murderers to further violence.

Even a superficial study of the history of satire – begin with Wikipedia – reveals it to be an ancient form, well-established in Greek and Roman literature, and seen as potentially dangerous from the beginning. Plato himself blamed the death of Socrates, at least in part, on the ridicule heaped upon old Soc by Aristophanes in the play [Clouds](#).

What could be more outrageous than Jonathan Swift in 1729 offering anonymously "[A Modest Proposal](#)" that poverty in Ireland could be solved by selling the oversupply of Irish babies as food for the upper class Brits: "A young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout."

Of course there were those who read Swift and thought his proposal was serious – and barbarous – an encouragement of cannibalism. This reveals one of the problems of satire. The capacity to understand irony, one of the essential strategies of satire, includes the ability to embrace a message and realize that it means something different – even the opposite – of what it delivers on the literal level.

Swift and most other satirists exist in a tradition that allows them to color outside the lines. A stock character in Shakespeare was the "licensed Fool," the court jester, one of the only figures who could speak truth to power. That license came with danger. If the King didn't laugh his head off at your impertinence, he might decide to have yours cut off. In cultures where satirists do their best work – like America, Great Britain, and France – there exists a social contract where writers and artists can walk along a ledge with a safety rope around their ankles.

Fanatics have changed that equation. Religious leaders put a [death sentence on Salman Rushdie](#). Countries that publish the work of [Danish cartoonists see their embassies threatened](#). Churches of the infidels are attacked, lives lost. And now an editorial meeting is interrupted by hooded assassins.

Are we prepared wage violent war to protect the work of cartoonists and satirists? At some point, the answer has to be yes. That said, I cannot help but remember Chaplin's statement that he would not have created his Hitler satire if he knew about the concentration camps. I want to see the movie "[The Interview](#)" as soon as I can to wave the flag of free speech against the digital terrorists who hacked SONY. But do I think it was a good idea to create a film in which American characters are sent to assassinate the

living president of an actual country? My answer is no.

One of the advantages of satire is the power of the veil, the ability of artists such as Swift or Huxley or Orwell to create worlds that seem brave and new, but are really our native lands in disguise. There is no battling the killers in Paris, or those who celebrate their crimes, with words and images. They and their kind must be brought to justice. We grieve with the dead as brothers and sisters of the image and the word.

Their lives are a testament to the power and dangers of free expression – which can come with such a terrible cost.