Essays

by Clay Bennett

As editorial cartoonists go, I’m one of the lucky ones.

I still have a staff job on a daily newspaper; the editors who employ me seem to really appreciate what I bring to the pages of their publication; and the newspaper itself is part of a chain that is both privately owned and carries no debt whatsoever.

That puts me in a position that many of my colleagues would envy. But even though my situation might make it a bit easier to sleep at night, I still sleep with one eye open, wary that my whole world could change at any given moment.

Such is the life of print journalist.

Everyone knows our industry is reeling. Competition from television, radio and especially the Internet has taken its toll on the popularity of newsprint journalism. And while job opportunities decrease with every shuttered newspaper, those of us who staff the remaining dailies live in constant fear of the next round of newsroom layoffs.

In these austere times, job security is the paramount concern of everyone working in print journalism, but for someone with an expertise that might seem like a luxury, and therefore more expendable, the anxiety is even more acute.

The number of staff editorial cartoonists has dwindled over my entire career, but the past decade has been particularly devastating for this profession. Currently, the number of full-time, staff editorial cartoonists is at an all-time low of just over 60, and I fully expect that number to continue to fall in the future.

But even though we may never make it off the endangered species list, I’m convinced that our complete extinction is avoidable. Who survives, however, may well be determined by who works the hardest to keep their position alive.

And that effort, I believe, will involve a lot more than just drawing cartoons.

Being an old-school newsmen, I have stubbornly held on to the belief that it is not the journalist but the journalism that matters. Consequently, my career has always been one devoted to the production of my cartoons and not the promotion of myself as a cartoonist.

I’ve always found the whole idea of self-promotion a bit unseemly, and, worse than that, counterproductive. As much as I love drawing cartoons, I’ve always detested selling them. The way I saw it, every minute I spent to promote or distribute my work came directly from the time I had to create it — a fact that led me to neglect and even resent the side of this business that would have garnered a wider audience for my work.

In the past, when the popularity of my cartoons was merely an issue of ego or income, it didn’t really matter, but now that the promotion of my work might well determine the likelihood of my professional survival, I have learned to embrace the aspects of this job that I had spurned in the past.
Understanding that my very future as a staff cartoonist was directly linked to the popularity of my work, I developed a strategy to both increase the readership of my cartoons and to promote myself as never before. And the way to achieve both of these goals was through the very medium that is the main source of my industry’s ills — the Internet.

Today’s newspaper understandably puts a lot of stock in its website and the readers it attracts. Realizing that the traffic any feature commands is the most tangible proof of its relative worth to the publication, I have been concentrating my efforts on driving more traffic to my cartoons online.

I saw social networking as the first step to achieving that goal. Currently, I post links on two separate Facebook pages that lead to my cartoons on my newspaper’s website. I began this effort by building an organic network of friends and colleagues but eventually established the strategy of targeting specific groups with cartoons that would appeal to their unique interests. I was literally looking for an audience, winning their support and thus establishing a wider following for my work.

The effort has really worked wonders. While my presence on Facebook has resulted in an exponential growth in the traffic to my cartoons online, my increased interaction with supporters through social media has served to build a more personal connection between the readers and myself.

Coupled with this outreach online, I have also worked to increase the number of public appearances I make locally. Although I have always been open to speaking in public, I am now much more ambitious about promoting myself for such events. And being able to publicize speeches and appearances online has produced larger audiences at each event and with it a greater demand to appear elsewhere.

Of course, this all takes time. Knowing that it would, I took on these additional tasks with the understanding that none of them would steal a single minute away from the production of my cartoons. That means the job that used to average 50 to 60 hours a week now demands between 70 and 80.

This is my new normal.

An editorial cartoonist who wants to hold on to a staff position can no longer merely draw cartoons and expect to thrive. In this brave new world of journalism, we’ll have to multitask to survive. From here on out, we have to be part cartoonist, part pen pal and part carnival Barker.

I now have a job that includes more responsibilities than at any point in my career. I put in longer hours than ever before and get paid less for the amount of work I do. But all that said, I’ve never been happier.

That is because the path I’ve taken these past few years, a journey that was driven by insecurity and fueled by desperation, has delivered me to a place of unexpected riches. I may have started out simply looking for an audience, but what I found instead was a community. Becoming a part of that community may not save my job, but it may save me should I ever lose my job.

Clay Bennett is the editorial cartoonist for the Chattanooga Times Free Press.
by Matt Davies

Back in ancient times (circa 2004), when I was the president of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists, our members were telling everyone who would listen that the field of editorial cartooning was threatened by quarterly-numbers-obsessed, content-indifferent corporate boardroom-dwellers. While I was personally experiencing what felt at the time like a career high, I could feel the instability of the business model that was keeping my beloved job afloat. I thought that, with personal high-speed Internet connections expanding like splitting atoms and newspaper circulation and advertising revenue dwindling, I had about a decade to figure out a safe newspaper exit strategy. Unfortunately, I was off by four years, and in November 2010, despite having won many major journalism awards, including a Pulitzer, an RFK Journalism Award and the Herblock Prize, and my cartoons being a well-known reader favorite, I joined the long roster of my cartooning colleagues before me, and my Gannett-owned newspaper laid me off.

My personal journey in the past 10 months has been both exhilarating and humbling, and it has afforded me the ability to pause and really think about the rapidly transforming professional future of the field of editorial cartooning. What’s informative is that while I was approached many, many times over the past 18 years of my career by newspapers seeking to lure me away — which served to boost both my earnings and my professional standing at my paper — my current search for work as a cartoonist has included not one single print newspaper.

Making a good living from drawing political satire will continue its 200-year-old tradition of being extremely difficult. As has always been true, different cartoonists with varying art skills, political and cultural savvy, writing abilities, work ethic, and business acumen (and luck) will forge different paths. Sadly, not everyone who chooses to call himself an editorial cartoonist is capable of being hugely valuable to a publisher of a newspaper, a website, an iPad app or a holographic laser newscast. The advice I would give to a young Mike Luckovich or a 22-year-old Tom Toles would be very different from the advice I might give to some others. When it comes to matters of creativity, everyone’s journey, by definition, must be different.

There will probably remain a few good print cartoon jobs for a period, but those could disappear as the migration to the Web completes itself and the 20th-century print advertising business model virtually evaporates. As newspapers writhe, contract and transition to Web-only operations, salaried cartoonists may very well exist once more, but only the sharpest and most interesting of our numbers will be signed up for that duty. And by then, the best or most entrepreneurial may have already carved a niche anyway. Already there are Ann Telnaes, Mark Fiore and Daryl Cagle, who have marched profitably into the digital universe, each pursuing avenues without staff positions. Without a doubt, many will follow, each with their own twist, whether it be through animation, or some other signature flourish.

It is still my firm belief, however, that to be effective, an editorial cartoonist needs a host platform. It can be exceptionally challenging for a modern political cartoonist to consistently attract enough unique visitors and wield worthwhile influence (and traffic) as a solo website proprietor. The old appeal of the editorial cartoon as the one voice that attracts attention and misbehaves in the sea of monotonous gray newsprint will be challenged. However while the Web is now filled with millions of opinions, much of them tongue-in-cheek, hard-hitting and badly behaved, the editorial cartoonist’s appeal will still be that she can do all this visually and stand out within an existing news platform. This distinction will help to identify a brand for a news site to be able to offer something different, in much the same way newspapers decided they needed the same so many years ago. The Web will undoubtedly provide some full-time employment opportunities, a lot of opportunities for freelance cartooning and definitely an unprecedented ability to showcase one’s own work.
Who Will Pay?

While the Web — bastion of “free content” — is dismembering the print business model and its concomitant considerable profits, it has simultaneously created the biggest opportunity for self-syndication, distribution and audience expansion. The question is: How does a cartoonist avoid toiling in obscurity, shoulder-to-shoulder with the vast majority of the tens of millions of bloggers and website operators, and somehow earn a living from it?

There are several possibilities:
The first and best option is the century-old solution of seeking out fiscally healthy news organizations and convincing them to simply create a cartooning job. I am willing to wager that in the 21st century, none of these will be newspapers. However in my Web news site inquiries, I have found no shortage of publishers who want cartoons. They just haven’t reached the levels of profitability where they can forgo a writer or two and indulge in fielding their own staff cartoonist. Yet.

The current temporary transition period from print to Web for editorial cartoonists could benefit from the participation of foundations that wish to loudly and playfully support the principles of the First Amendment. (Paradoxically, the best-funded practitioners of news and analysis are nonprofits.) This could be done through matching grants to fledgling news websites that might wish to have their own cartoonists but can’t allocate satisfactory funding. For example, an organization such as the Herblock Foundation or the Knight Foundation could offer $50,000 to offset one half a salary to a group that wishes to contract the full-time services of its favorite pen-and-ink slinger.

For the Herblock Foundation — whose mission statement is to promote and support the field of editorial cartooning in America — this would make sense. As a cartoonist, I feel it is my duty to point out the irony of a nonprofit, generously funded by a famous 20th-century cartoonist to promote his pro-underdog values and the industry he loved so much, desperately figuring out how to Save The Cartoonists.

Another nonprofit-based possibility is that of the ProPublica model. Funding is allocated entirely by a foundation (in ProPublica’s case, the Sandler Foundation) that wishes to support a particular societal goal. Obviously the tricky part is establishing a relationship with a deep-pocketed group that wishes to fund the work of one or more editorial cartoonists. An adjunct to that idea is the establishment of a support guild, originally discussed by members of the Editorial Cartooning Initiative, that would provide a group health/pension/fee structure for cartoonists. A complicated idea, but well worth a discussion. (The biggest issue would be that cartoonists are by definition hard to organize. They tend to be strong-willed lone operators who have little interest in leading and even more disdain for following.)

A third avenue is for artists to provide paid editorial cartoons for like-minded political lobbying entities that feel that an editorial cartoon will help promote a specific message that the cartoonist already agrees with, which may work for those cartoonists who possess a little of the mercenary spirit.

And another option is to go it alone and try to build one’s own Web following, using social sites such as Twitter and Facebook for promotion. For the record, I have tried this and while I have had healthy traffic numbers, they are erratic, unique users can be fickle, and I earned $8,81 from advertisers in the month of August from this particular source. Others’ results may, of course, vary.

The final question that remains: is the editorial cartoon syndication model sustainable? After I left my newspaper and began shopping my wares to websites, I told them that they could pay for an original cartoon and then I could distribute it through my fancy-pants syndication contract, thinking that the print
publicity of getting the websites’ names into, say, the Boston Globe or the Washington Post would be a very attractive proposition. Surprisingly, it was not the enticing sales tool I thought it would be. Websites looking for unique users have in fact expressed a desire NOT to allow work to be syndicated, so that users have to come to their sites to view the exclusive work of their contracted cartoonist.

At first I was puzzled, but in a Web filled with cartoon roundups and galleries, I gradually found myself understanding the need for exclusivity. So while there is still a fairly strong market for print syndication, only the most creative, agile and adaptive syndicates will be successful in selling previously published material on the Web. And they may find themselves inadvertently competing with their own creators. For some cartoonists, without a salary to offset low syndication revenue and a contractually dictated workload, the idea of syndication may be more of a burden than an asset.

Eventually, as profits grow from Web news sites, I do think some will adopt traits of print models past, and a good staff cartoonist may be what they feel they need to stand out from the others. My own personal experience can attest to this. I recently was contracted by Remapping Debate.org — a nonprofit news site — to create an original weekly editorial cartoon. They were anxious to create a home page that carved out a different look from other sites in the genre. They decided to place my black-and-white editorial cartoon front and center, which I was naturally very pleased about. After we were done negotiating and they sent me a mock up of the front page to look over, I couldn’t help noticing the historical symmetry with the 1881 Harpers Weekly I have on the wall of my office. There on the cover page — front and center — is a black-and-white Thomas Nast editorial cartoon.

Matt Davies is editorial cartoonist for Tribune Media Services and the Hearst Newspaper Group in Connecticut.
by Mark Fiore

I’m honored to be asked to contribute my thoughts on the future of editorial cartooning and hope I may bring a seed or two of hope to the discussion. My first overarching thought is that we, as political cartoonists, have been operating on a wing and a prayer for some time now, which is really just another way of saying “entrepreneurial.” “Seat-of-the-pants,” “wing-and-a-prayer,” “tap dancing” and “juggling” are all just ways of saying that we’re making things up as we go along as conditions change rapidly all around us. “Entrepreneurial” sounds best because it implies success, so let’s go with that term.

Unfortunately, there really are no more jobs in the field. There may be the occasional Chicago Tribune position that is filled or a Washington Post slot, but these are anomalies. While that sounds pretty depressing for the field, I think it can be somewhat liberating, as it has been in my case. We’ve got to change our mindset from the days of staff political cartoonists and look at ourselves as free-agent personalities. We are in charge, not the publishers. Yes, this means forgetting health benefits, parking spaces and vacation days, but it also means more flexibility and potentially greater compensation, or worse compensation if your entrepreneurial bets don’t work out. Sure, the safe stability of a small raise at your annual review is gone, but you can aim higher on your own. In short, the stakes are higher: You can lose more and you can win more.

Only people truly dedicated to political cartooning and the world of satire would be crazy enough to revel in a profession that has such shaky odds. But then again, a career in banking isn’t so safe now, either. Political cartooning/journalism isn’t the only profession that has changed dramatically in recent history, so I think it’s important to take a macro-view of our plight as much as possible. In short, we are figuring out ways to make funny pictures and stand on our soapbox . . . and get paid to do it. I’d say that’s a pretty lofty goal in just about any economic situation. We’re damn lucky and we want to keep it this way.

The best way to keep our craft moving in a forward direction is to look at ourselves as unique, unduplicatable creative minds with our own brands. We’ve got to elevate ourselves out of the employer/employee relationship and see ourselves as entrepreneurial cartoonists/artists/performers who are on our own. Though I create cartoons bashing an unfettered free market, whether I like it or not, I’m basically living it. Staying positive and doing everything you can to build your own empire is the best way I’ve found to handle this situation. Sure, I don’t have a paycheck, but I also don’t have a publisher who can fire me! I may lose a client, but I can’t be given a box and shown the door.

In this new environment, there is added pressure to be unique and stand out from the crowd. This is mainly due to cartoons being delivered online, where all the other cartoonists are just a click away. You’ve got to give viewers or editors a reason to follow or buy your work. A MacNelly clone is going to have a very hard time, so you’ve got to have an original style and voice. While the pressure to stand out from the crowd was always there, it has grown more intense because the online world is much smaller than the old print world. At the risk of verging on motivational career-speak: Be yourself, stay positive.

Now that I’ve detailed the more theoretical, broad brushstrokes of what direction I think this profession may take, let’s do the harder part of the job and talk specifics for my case. I haven’t really thought of myself as having a job since 2001, when for several short months I had a staff political cartooning position with the San Jose Mercury News. Ever since then (and before then), I’ve been engaged in anything from a career to a compulsion.
When I look at the future of my career, I see myself continuing to rely on the basic elements that have served me well so far: an entrepreneurial attitude and a willingness to adapt to new technology and new markets. Or put another way, keep experimenting and trying new things!

When print cartooning was my main focus, I experimented on the side with political animation, initially just as a creative experiment. Before long, I decided to experiment with the market and see if anyone would actually buy these things. I sold the animation the same way I was selling my print work, by knocking on (now online) editors’ doors and selling them the right to publish my work. This simple freelance/self-syndication model has worked for years and continues to make up a large portion of my income.

Another experiment that has paid off over the years is to work with organizations that aren’t traditional media outlets but that have an extensive reach. I am occasionally approached by organizations such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, which see that my environmental cartoons align with their message. I create cartoons for these groups that are distributed to their members (just like subscribers) and have a reach beyond the millions of members thanks to viral distribution. This work is slightly different from my self-syndicated weekly work in that it is an animation done exclusively for one client, whereas my weekly animation is done via a non-exclusive license.

The self-syndicated cartoon and the occasional custom animation have made up the overwhelming bulk of my income since 2001. I am now increasingly focused on new experiments and finding new revenue streams because the self-syndication model seems to be on the wane. Youtube and “free” viral videos have had a huge impact on that portion of my business and have contributed to the notion that everything is free on the Internet.

After cursing Youtube and fighting the free distribution of content for a few years, I embraced its model and began receiving ad revenue from my Youtube channel. While it doesn’t yet equal my more traditional self-syndication stream, it has great potential and completely eliminates editors and news sites from the equation. My main fear is cannibalizing my weekly (paying) online news site clients by releasing the animation on Youtube, where anyone can embed it on their site for free. My solution is to embargo my release on Youtube until a week has passed, so the traditional paying clients have the animation for a week before it is released to the Youtube hordes. I could do much better with my Youtube traffic and ad revenue if I released all at once, but that may kill my weekly news site clients. So at this point, it’s a bit of a dance down the middle until one beats out the other.

Another avenue that paid off was my iPhone app. Initially just an experiment to see whether I could get my animation on an iPhone, it turned into a fairly profitable little venture thanks to a bump in publicity from Steve Jobs. I’ve lost quite a bit of momentum with this project due to development/programming hassles. Apps are difficult because as a cartoonist you are at the mercy of programmers, who are in high demand right now. Once I get the bugs worked out of the production process, I think this could be a great/profitable outlet for my work (and for other political cartoonists), but app development comes with a new set of hurdles and challenges.

Over the past year, I’ve begun to do more public speaking and now have an agent. I’m still very much in the early stages of this portion of my career, but it has been fairly successful without too much additional work. Public speaking is one of the best ways to build up the cartoonist-as-entrepreneur concept and is an important part of “building the brand.”
In the Real Long Shot Department, I also have a television agent. With the success of satire on cable television and shows such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, Hollywood is now more receptive to political content. While it is easy to get lured by the siren song of Hollywood bucks that may or may not materialize, this is just another iron in the fire that I try to keep active without hurting the other elements of my business. As political cartoonists, we have a huge advantage over the thousands of people who are trying to sell something in Hollywood. We have characters, we write regularly, we are published and we have a certain amount of renown.

Although all of these avenues have potential and sound great, my main problem is finding the time to pursue the various possibilities or experiments. It can be frustrating at times, but I try to keep moving forward on different fronts, even though it may not be at the level that is ideal. There are only so many hours in the day. Any entrepreneurial adaptability will pay off more than just trying to hold on at all costs to what was successful in the past.

As you can see from my story, I don’t think there is one thing that is going to save political cartooning. There are devices and satire-delivery-methods not yet invented and business models not yet explored. What will save political cartooning is our elemental skill at satire and our adaptability. This is an exciting/important/scary time of change, but we are better equipped than most to have careers that are truly entrepreneurial.

Mark Fiore is a political cartoonist for who specializes in Flash-animated editorial cartoons.
By Kevin Kallaugher (KAL)

Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts on the important question: What’s next for editorial cartooning?

Hmmm ... good question. The immediate reasonable answer might be “slow death.”

Our numbers are rapidly shrinking as newspapers diminish. We know the dire situation for the print industry is not likely to improve. Nor will the lot of the print cartoonist.

A decade from now, only a small group of staff cartoonists might exist. These cartoonists will probably be with large, wealthier papers (only three of the top ten papers today have a cartoonist on the payroll).

Their bosses will probably require them to draw mostly on local issues. They will also be asked to maintain a blog and a presence on other “new media” (Twitter, Facebook etc.).

This will be a far cry from the days of Herblock at The Post.

Despite this dark picture for editorial cartoonists, I remain optimistic. I believe an exciting new world lies ahead for the visual satirist.

Henceforth, I think it might be best to describe us as visual satirists rather than editorial cartoonists.

A cartoonist is the product of the print media. The visual satirist uses all media available as a tool of expression.

For a century we visual satirists used newspaper cartoons as our media of choice. Earlier visual satirists from Hogarth, Gillray and Daumier onward used prints, lithographs and paintings as their milieu.

The main theater for the future visual satirist will be the Internet.

I suspect visual satirists will employ four major vehicles for their expression:

1) Daily web cartoons
2) Web comics
3) Cartoon journalism
4) Film and animation

Daily Web Cartoons: This would be the closest thing to the editorial cartoon we know today.

It will be a drawn, satirical take on the day’s news. The main difference from its print cousin will be its interactivity. Readers will post comments and forward the art to other social media sites. The artwork itself could also contain sound effects and links to other relevant sites.

The attraction of this form is its topicality and immediacy.

Web comics: The print newspaper has limited real estate to display cartoons. websites on the Internet have no such limitation. As a result visual satirists can employ long-format narrative techniques as a medium of expression.

Already there is a thriving community of Web comics, though the form is not primarily used for political commentary. They closely resemble comic books or graphic novels in format.
The attraction of Web comics is their engaging visual format. The downside is they take longer to create. Weekly instead of daily installments would be more probable (losing, in turn, some of the topical appeal of the daily Web cartoon).

Cartoon journalism: This is an area of particular interest. Several recent artists have harnessed the long-form cartoon style (like the comic book or the Web comic) as a tool for reportage.

This is an exciting new area of development for the craft. In this format, the cartoonist/satirist/journalist researches an issue and uses the medium of cartoon art to deliver the story.

The most prominent name in the craft today is Joe Sacco, who has created several graphic novels around such subjects as the plight of Palestine (for which he won an American Book Award) and the war in Bosnia.

The Cartoon Movement, a nonprofit group based in Holland, is funding projects to encourage cartoon journalism, including a recent program in Haiti.

Animation: No doubt, the area with most potential for the visual satirist is in animation.

The still image has its power. But a moving image is almost always a more potent weapon.

Until recently, animation was a no-go area for topical satirists. Animation was a time-intensive medium taking days, sometimes weeks to produce seconds of film. Meanwhile, politics can change on a dime. The prospects of topical animation seemed out of the question.

Now with the advances in computer software, topical animated cartoons can be produced.

We are familiar with the work of Ann Telnaes and Mark Fiore in this field. I believe more will follow.

The promise of animation still has its limits. It is still a lengthy, technical and sometimes expensive process. I believe these barriers will become lower in the years ahead.

There are two challenges that will face all the visual satirists of the future. The first is money.

In the transition from print to digital media, cartoonists will suffer financially.

Currently, I describe the media landscape as the “Wild West” — a lawless, freewheeling environment where everyone is searching for gold but where few make it rich.

Like the Wild West, I think this time will pass.

Right now, the prospects of earning money on the Internet seem slim.

But many media groups on the Web are now experimenting with paywalls. They believe people are willing to pay for quality. I agree with that premise. In time, more opportunities to earn money on the Web will emerge.

The second challenge for the visual satirist of the future will be to create high-quality content that is worth paying for.

Just as our satirist forefathers earned their money by selling high-quality prints and lithographs, we need to produce goods of value we can sell.
My plans for the future are focused on animation. I am working with The Economist on a series of short (1:15 minute) animations.

Following my own advice, I am opting to go with a higher-quality product. This requires employing animators and voice actors. The result is a more expensive creation.

To finance this, The Economist is looking to sponsor these films. The magazine would procure an advertiser to sponsor a series of 5 or 10 animations in exchange for a short 10-second “pre-roll” plug.

Alas… My 1,000 words are nearly up.

Once again, allow me to thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts on the future of my craft. I would be delighted to talk with you further on the subject.

Kevin Kallaugher (KAL) is the editorial cartoonist for The Economist magazine of London.