

It's not just a cartoon: why satire should come of age

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To go from “Je suis Charlie” to suing Charlie doesn’t really take much. The Italian town of Amatrice knows it well. After an earthquake that claimed 295 victims, the famously controversial French publication ran a cartoon called “[Earthquake Italian Style](#)”, showing a bleeding man with a big nose wrapped in bandages, with the caption “Penne [a type of pasta, also pronounced like the French word for pain] Tomato Sauce”. Next to him, an old lady with burned skin and a saggy breasts is dubbed “Penne Gratin”, while bodies buried under layers of collapsed houses are called “Lasagne”. Amatrice responded with an [aggravated defamation complaint](#) against *Charlie Hebdo*.

The cartoon certainly sparked controversy. On one hand were those outraged by *Charlie Hebdo*’s mocking depiction of suffering people. On the other hand were those defending the cartoon on the basis that it was denouncing an issue of poor administration in Italy, which aggravated the natural disaster.

Just a few weeks earlier, we witnessed a similar upheaval against another satirical cartoon. *The Australian*, a leading publication down under, [published a drawing of an Aboriginal kid](#) consigned to a negligent dad by a policeman. The cop says: “You’ll have to sit down, and talk to your son about personal responsibility”. The father — barefoot and holding a beer can — doesn’t even remember the boy’s name.

In both those cases, the kind of satire we saw was not that which targets those in power and the government. It was rather one that used the victims of a tragedy or an issue in order to address some larger, nebulous problem in a non-specific, non-proactive way.

While the cartoons’ ethos was similar, we must note some major differences between the two publications. *The Australian* is a leading national news magazine. Their use of cartoons is a counterpoint to the news of the day. *Charlie Hebdo* is a satirical magazine devoted to a provocative, aggressive kind of humour. The offensive content of their cartoons has always been proudly reclaimed as an expression of freedom and independence.

We also see these two cartoons coming from countries with radically different attitudes towards what is allowed in the public sphere. France certainly has laws against hate, racism and discrimination. Nonetheless, it has always prided itself to be pro-intellectual freedom — their own definition of it, that is. The hijab and burqa bans proved that to most of the French people, *laicism* is a higher expression of freedom than multiculturalism. On the other hand Australia — a country built on immigration — holds the Anglo-Saxon conception of the politically correct.

Following the massacre at *Charlie Hebdo* on the 7th of January 2015, we have seen the concept of the politically correct and the idea of freedom of satire conflicting in the public sphere. Back then the debate was whether or not *Charlie Hebdo*’s cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed crossed the line of what was acceptable to depict in media. Most expressed unconditional solidarity by adopting the “Je suis Charlie” slogan. A [few thought](#) that while violence is never justified, [Charlie Hebdo’s cartoons](#) were [indeed offensive](#). Almost no one noted that today it is satire itself that just doesn’t work the way it used to.

Don’t get me wrong; I’m not arguing that satire is always bad and should disappear altogether. I’m suggesting that cartoonists must evolve. Or, if they keep on being in denial of the times we are facing and their complexities, they should just be pushed aside. Change is needed because in today’s visually-led society, cartoonists have an unprecedented power of communicating with everyone with an internet connection. For this very reason, they can’t afford to be irresponsible, sloppy, complacent, cynical, generic, naïve. Cartoonists are required to acknowledge their power, role and responsibility in society. This calls for much more than simply having drawing skills. It calls for empathy.

Satire can’t be misunderstood; otherwise it has failed

The first argument the advocates of the aforementioned cartoons brought about was that the humour wasn’t understood. However, if the readers don’t get a cartoon, the cartoon has failed in its intent. Trying to appease the controversy, both *The Australian* and *Charlie Hebdo* produced counter-cartoons, offered up as an “explanation” for the first images — referencing [political correctness](#) and [the mafia](#), respectively. But this move only made the situation worse, showing that the cartoonists didn’t learn from their mistakes. As a general rule, you can’t ask those you offended to try harder to get you when you haven’t done any effort to respect their sensitivity.

The satirist must be an insider

The identity of the satirist is of great importance when you talk about such delicate topics like race or natural disasters — and it should be disclosed when controversies arise. In both *The Australian* and *Charlie Hebdo*’s cases, the cartoonist didn’t share any insider knowledge or experience about the issue — this is why they recurred to the stereotype of the drunk Aboriginal and the Italians’ pasta, mafia and mandolino. An insider would have by default treated the same issue in a very different way.

Plus, if the same cartoons were realized by an Aboriginal person or an Italian, they would have represented a self-analysis, not a judgment from outside. The controversy came indeed from the fact that you could see that the cartoonists didn't share any kind of emotional connection with the issue or the people they depicted.

Over-simplification is a bad tool in a complicated world

Satire criticizes in a direct, simplified way, akin to a slogan. A slogan-driven critique is functional to a hard, monolithic society that needs to be challenged. In the past, individuals belonging to a structured context had some room to question certain rules, while continuing to live by others.

But it not just about the punch line. When it comes to satirical cartoons, most of the job is done by an image. In order to be identifiable for the reader, the depiction must be symbolic, using either archetypes or stereotypes understood in a certain culture. In other words, in order for the mockery to work, the cartoonist and the audience must have a set of common references. Irony worked very well indeed across the 20th century, when there were less players on the horizon, and it was clear who was against who. With the internet the audience is suddenly *everyone*, so the satirist and the audience can come from radically different places.

In this scenario, the possible meanings of a cartoon multiply exponentially. A vignette done in France on Italians can easily spark rage among Italians — just like an aggressive vignette mocking Mohammed can not only offend fundamentalists, but also upset moderate Muslims. The only result is putting people on the defensive, hindering an already difficult dialogue.

It is of course impossible for a cartoonist to take into account all possible audiences across countries, cultures, communities and minorities. On the reader's part, misunderstanding can be avoided by going back to the original context where a cartoon was created to assess whether a cartoon was drawn in good faith or from cynicism. Cartoonists on their part should do their best to take into account some of the most evident "accidental narratives"; the ones of those involved as a subject matter to start with.

The satirist must cultivate empathy and responsibility

Cartoonists must be very specific in the issues they are addressing. If they are not insiders, they have to do their best to develop an emphatic connection with the issue, and not just treat it superficially. Freedom of expression is of course important, but it needs to pass the test of personal ethics. Cartoonists must remember they are not telling jokes in private, but playing in the public arena, overheard by — possibly — the whole world.

At the end of the day, you might argue that there are more important things in the world to discuss than cartoons. But saying "it's just a cartoon" means trying to deny its incredible power. Jesters can still have a very important role in society; all we want is for them to embrace it, run with it, and do their job properly, with empathy and responsibility. Cynicism is cheap these days, and it won't get us anywhere.

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