

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 8 (1), Serial No. 32, January, 2014:32-41

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrev.8i1.3>

Cartoons, Cartoonists and Effective Communication in the Nigeria Print Media

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Abstract

Cartoons have over the years become very prominent features of newspapers and magazines that some of them are sought by readers for their cartoons. However, there is the tendency to see cartoons as very trivial issues meant to create fun and laughter for readers only. This paper takes a critical look at the effectiveness of cartoons in print media communication and the safety they offer for the print media in terms of freedom of expression, especially during the intolerant military regimes. Premised on the Agenda setting theory, the paper equally evaluates the position of the cartoonist within his own organization and concludes that the lot of the cartoonist needs to be bettered to position him for higher productivity.

Key words: cartoons, communication, print media, caricature

Introduction

Cartoons have over the years become a major feature of newspaper and magazine content in Nigeria. A panoramic observation would reveal that most daily newspapers and weekly magazines publish various cartoons and comic strips. *The Punch, the Guardian, New Nigerian, Nigerian Tribune, Tell, Newswatch, the News*, etc, all publish cartoons and comic strips on social, political and economic affairs of the country or as illustrations of some editorial matter.

Some of these cartoons have become so popular that some newspapers and magazines are sought by some readers because of their cartoons. To buttress this point, a one-time editor of *Sunday Times* puts it this way in the March 19th, 2000 edition of *Sunday Punch* (p.27);

I read cartoons every day, especially Punch cartoons. It takes great minds to understand cartoon. Cartoons are so important they do something to ones system. As Editor Sunday Times, I used more illustrative than pictures. At a time cancelled the Garth cartoon series and I received hundreds of letters, some abusive, telling me they have been reading Garth before I was born. People read a lot of things Editors do not respect but which are best sellers.

In mass communication, certain schools of thought have argued that the mass media promote the cultural, economic as well as the political interests of the dominant class in the society. This is the view of scholars like Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse (The Frankfurt School) and other Marxist scholars like Stuart Hall and John Fiske. Their view is predicated on the idea of Marx and Engels (1970 p.64) cited in Curran et al (eds.) (1979, p.32) that;

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has means of

material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

Arguing against this position, this paper opines that not all aspects of the mass media function the same way or conform to this Marxist paradigm. That newspaper and magazines cartoons generally evoke humour and laughter from readers could be taken to mean an attempt by newspaper editors at trivializing serious issues and by implication sedating the oppressed masses and keeping them in check.

Cartoon defined

By definition, the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Macro-Paedia, vol.3) sees cartoon as a pictorial parody or imitation, which, by the devices of caricature, analogy as well as ludicrous juxtaposition, sharpens the public view of a contemporary or topical issue, event, political or social trend. A cartoon carries with it the caricature as an almost indispensable element. Just as the caricature is for an audience that is familiar with the original, the cartoon is based on wide acquaintance with the subject. Cartoons come in various forms: the comic strip, animated cartoons for the electronic media (such as “Tom and Jerry,” “Superman” “Pocahontas,” etc.) and editorial cartoons in newspapers and magazines. It is important at this point to note or emphasize that this paper focuses on newspapers and magazine editorial cartoons.

Historical background of cartoons

The Encyclopaedia Britannica (Macro-paedia, vol.3) says the cartoon is originally meant to be a drawing, a full size pattern for execution in painting and tapestry. It was the final stage in the series of drawn preparations for painting in traditional renaissance studio practice. By the 1840s when that studio practice was rapidly declining, cartoon rather acquired a new meaning (earlier given in the introduction).

In 1843 the British parliament ordered for designs in a competition for fresco. These designs were later parodied in *The Punch* by John Leech. He used the cartoon to satirize and lampoon the socio-political abuses of that period. From that moment, the word cartoon acquired its present popular meaning of a humorous drawing or parody that satirizes. Over the years, cartoons have gained prominence in newspapers and magazines in different countries, not only as means of entertainment and education but also as tools for enhancing the sale of the papers.

The relative peace that Europe enjoyed after the First World War (1914-1918) witnessed a great boom in the newspaper publishing business and in turn, this influenced the use of cartoons for socio-political commentary.

According to Nze (1989, p.21), the importance of cartoons as instrument of political and social commentary was not confined to Europe alone. During the American Civil War, the cartoon became a powerful tool on the side of the North and in the overthrow (in 1873) of the corrupt political group known as the Tweed Ring which controlled the government of New York from about 1870.

By the 1800s, cartoons had become so important in the American newspaper industry that through it a type of journalism that lays emphasis on sensationalism, gossip, crime, sex, etc. got the name "Yellow Journalism". It happened that an American newspaper publisher, Hearst, hired an illustrator, Richard F. Outcault from Joseph Pulitzer's *The World*. Outcault had drawn a child cartoon character who appeared in yellow dress and became known as the "Yellow Kid".

Biittner (1989, p.40) says however, the kid stayed behind at Pulitzer's *The World* to be drawn by George B. Luks. This era became known as the yellow journalism era. Coupled with the popularity of the penny press (an era that flourished after that of yellow journalism), newspapers became very powerful and influential among the masses. Still in the US, general interest in cartoon, their interpretation and

relevance became heightened when an individual like Bill Mauldin of The Chicago Sun Times and nineteen (19) students of Yale University started a course in political cartoon. The interest this aroused gave those students the opportunity to know the extent of freedom of expression that cartoons guarantee. It also exposed them to the technicalities involved in cartooning that one of the students, a sophomore quoted by Robert (1977, p.9) remarked, “It is harder to come up with a succinct caption than it is to write a five page research paper.” The 20th Century saw cartoons become a daily feature of newspapers and magazines.

Cartoons in the Nigerian print media

Newspapers in the missionary era, which was considered the first period in Nigerian print Journalism never gave regard to cartoon. The period of the nationalist press considered as the second era of print journalism in Nigeria marked the adaptation of the western tradition of featuring comic strips which were normally placed in the foreign news section of the papers. From 1960 to date, the trend in most Nigerian newspapers and magazines has been a combination of both comics and serious political cartoons.

Communication scholars are all agreed that, as it is with many subjects, visuals greatly assist in arousing readers’ interests. In the print media, cartoons equally assist in providing a clear mental picture, speed understanding, help memory and provide a shared experience. Some cartoons are even featured without captions or written explanations, yet the messages inherent in them are still understood by readers. “Memoirs” in the Saturday Punch is a good example of such.

The cartoon serves as a capsule version of editorial opinion meant for the reading public to swallow and probably get some societal ills cured. In other words, the drawing or graphic illustration and the commentaries in cartoons on political and social issues are not only intended to create fun for the readers but they also seek to ginger their

sense of reasoning into clamouring for positive change in the political structure.

The political cartoon is often satirical in nature and castigates the social misdeeds, sayings, views or events that have to do with highly placed personalities. The cartoon is therefore a vital tool employed by the press for its watchdog role in the society.

By keeping public officials on their toes, the cartoon assists in correcting societal ills. A quotation in the *Punch* of Wednesday 23rd May 2000 (1998, p.143), says cartoons offer a retreat from reality and that in many ways the world is not particularly comfortable. He says although many cartoons are entirely serious in their intentions, it is through humour that some of these difficult matters are exorcised. We could see cartoons as rehearsals of problems and solutions.

The cartoonist acts as the conscience or the voice of the people. He speaks for and represents the opinion of the people. On this, Alimi and Shopeju (1999, p.62) give the following example:

When the Uwaifo Judicial panel absolved Alhaji Shehu Shagari and Dr. Alex Ekweme for charges of corruption leveled against them, ‘Kabiyesi’ in the *National Concord* had this comment;” why did the army take over?” Many Nigerians would have asked this question if they had the opportunity.

The two scholars cited above also regard cartoon as topical. Because of this, the cartoonist functions as a chronicler of events, which are graphically presented. Reading through the cartoons of a particular period will definitely assist in remembering the major events of that period. The common features of editorial cartoons according to Lasekan (n.d.) are a good grasp of current affairs, clearly identified political issues and problems that are local and international and also deft craftsmanship and skill in snappy graphic language. Folks (1963, p.309) makes this clearer when he says;

He is a strong story teller in pictures, and his whole quality depends on whether he has a good story to tell and an interesting way of telling it. The stories are short and they should be told easily and suddenly. The drawing should appear to have arrived on the paper as naturally as a conversation.

The cartoonists' forte is always sarcasm and humour and more often than not, officialdom and the upper classes of the society are his subjects of ridicule. The cartoonist and his trade can be likened to the traditional satirist or court jester in a palace. He is at liberty to praise a ruler, to make him angry without facing any punitive measure. In traditional societies, the satirist serves as an institution of social control. This could be in the form of songs, poems in which outfits lampoon the misdeeds, and scandals involving some culprits no matter how highly or lowly placed they are in the society. Among the Igalas of central Nigeria for instance, this role is not only played by satirists alone but by musicians, drummers and an anonymous masquerade called Abule. The Abule enjoys unprecedented immunity because of his anonymity. Today, all these are being replicated in cartoons because this generation is years ahead in literacy compared to the traditional societies of old.

The cartoon offers entertainment for newspaper and magazine readers. Entertainment is one of the cardinal roles of the press in the society. Even though some people are of the opinion that "Life is too serious for laughter" (to quote an anonymous English Politician), laughter is an antidote to stress, a palliative therapy for the depressed. Using his art the cartoonist cheers people up when they are low-spirited. One can conveniently refer to the cartoon as a safety valve meant to ease tension and stress. It is therefore very apt when J. Geipel, in David and Charles (1972, p.74) describes it as the slang of graphic art. He says;

Like verbal slang, they tend to rely for their impact on spontaneity, playfulness, popular imagery and

often deliberate vulgarity... providing a most suitable way out of mans healthy and irresistible urge to poke fun at his fellow, institutions and himself.

A critical analysis of Giepel's statement could lead to a tendency to see the cartoon as a vehicle for trivializing very serious political and social issues of human life. But the reverse is actually the case. Most of art- drama, music, painting, prose writing, poetry are all engaged in this, making fun of serious situations but simultaneously, launching pungent attacks on such situations and the personalities involved. Cartoons cover the pulse of the nation. They bring out in sublime ways the social contradictions in the society. They also provide a means of educating readers and equally offer opinion leadership. Invariably, the cartoonist makes it possible for a society to engage in soul searching.

The importance attached to newspaper cartoons and what they typify can be seen in the reactions of Islamic faithful across the world in 2006 over the cartoons of Prophet Mohammed in a Danish Newspaper. It took months of international diplomacy to bring the situation under control. Writing on the importance of cartoon in communication, Schrank (1984, p.13) says "A gag cartoon is to be savoured, not just looked at and read. The subtleties of the art are considerable."

These subtleties are under the fact that even in the face of intolerant military regimes that previously governed Nigeria, not even one cartoonist was arrested and detained as other journalists were subjected to. This points to the fact that cartoons are safety canopies under which a newspaper or magazine can hide to say what cannot be stated in plain editorials. Oseni (1999, p.195) puts it thus;

...In the course of protecting its voice and freedom without extolling sycophancy, the Nigerian press has discovered that the cartoon is a formidable weapon. Because its residual power is visual, a good political cartoon may say in only a few brushstrokes much

more than a persuasive writer may say in hundreds of words.

Conclusion

Predicated on the Agenda setting theory of the press, this paper maintains that cartoons help to set the tone of public discussions over issues of national concern.

Recommendations

Therefore having examined and analyzed their importance as safe and effective means of communication for print media operators, it is imperative to recommend that cartoonists be given the recognition they deserve by print media owners. Their plight as it is today calls for concern. Aleshinloye (2005, p.70) puts thus;

However all is not well with editorial cartooning presently. Newspaper managers are not getting the best out of cartoonist's because there is disequilibrium between what they feel a cartoonist's role should be and what his role really is while some editors feel that the cartoonist should be an illustrator, rendering what they cannot draw themselves, some perceive the cartoonist as a kind of medieval court fool, to be tolerated, but not taken seriously.

This trend must change considering the vital roles cartoons play in the world of newspapers and magazines. Cartoonists that have served long and mature enough can occupy seats on the editorial board of media organizations.

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