

Covid in Cartoons

(<https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons>)

Bringing together an interdisciplinary team of researchers at the University of Leicester and external partners Shout Out UK and Cartooning for Peace to collaborate on a UKRI COVID-19 rapid response grant (2021-2022).

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Cartooning: A Delicate Art Form that Needs to be Preserved

(<https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons/2021/12/28/cartooning-delicate-art-form-needs-preserved/>)

Posted by fl47 (https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons/author/fransiska_louwagie/) in Covid in Cartoons (<https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons>) on December 28, 2021 (Tuesday, December 28th, 2021, 9:19 pm)

‘A pencil is like a torch’. The phrase stood out to me during my interview with Michel Kichka — illustrator, caricaturist and political cartoonist. In a way, the phrase cast a light on the role and responsibilities connected to political cartooning. In fact, it serves as a helpful embodiment of political cartooning.

Shout Out UK has been working with Cartooning for Peace and the University of Leicester to run COVID in Cartoons, a project helping young people express themselves and engage in politics through cartoon creation. As part of the project, SOUK young writers interviewed a range of diverse and incredibly talented cartoonists from Cartooning for Peace about their craft and the importance of political cartooning as a whole.



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Cartooning for Peace

Michel Kichka (<https://www.cartooningforpeace.org/en/dessinateurs/kichka/>) is one of over 200 cartoonists associated with the Cartooning for Peace (<https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2021/04/09/covid-cartoons-young-people-caption-coronavirus-with-political-cartoons-one-frame-at-a-time/>) network. Though he initially wished to be an architect, he always loved caricature and Belgian magazines full of cartoons and comics. He was the self-admitted artist of the class. From there, he has worked as an illustrator and a comic book artist and then a cartoonist. In 2011 he was made a Knight of Arts and Letter by the French Government.

Cartooning for Peace transcends borders. The cartoonists are based all over the world; from Switzerland to Sudan, and from Israel to Iran — all united in their promotion of a cartoonist's right to freedom of expression.

Cartooning as a subtle Art Form

Cartooning as an art form — with its inherent usage of satire, subtext and humour — has a long history. Kichka named William Hogarth, regarded by the Tate as 'the grandfather of satire' (<https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-9-spring-2007/grandfather-satire>), as an inspiration. Upon examination of Hogarth's work, it is easy to see why Kichka argues the role of a political cartoonist has not changed. It is just as easy to envisage Hogarth's famous *Beer Street and Gin Lane* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6J03q3t9ao>) piece, a pro-Gin Act depiction of the benefits of drinking beer over gin, appearing today. Think of the numerous cartoons published in the run-up to the UK's Brexit referendum (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/mar/20/brexit-silly-walk-best-political-cartoons-eu-europe-referendum>) — at their core, modern cartoons have the same ambition as those of the 18th century. Through subtext, cartoonists convey messages.

But the message must be provocative. Kichka is firm on this point, saying: 'if you do a cartoon and everybody likes it, perhaps your point is not strong enough'. There is merit in this; political cartoonists serve as a litmus test for freedom of expression. If there is a situation where a cartoonist is afraid to publish something, no matter how controversial, we as a society must look closer and ask whether this is indicative of limited freedoms. Therein lies the aim of Kichka and Cartooning for Peace: protecting freedom of expression.

‘A pencil is like a torch’. How forthright this quote has proven to be in light of coronavirus and subsequent government handlings. Worse still, as Kichka has criticized, to some leaders coronavirus has been a means to an end. Leaders like Hungary’s Orbán and Putin of Russia serve as sorrowful examples, with the former using Covid-19 to justify ruling by decree without parliamentary oversight (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/25/hungarys-prime-minister-is-using-virus-make-an-authoritarian-power-grab/>).

Here is where the cartoonist and his ‘torch’ come in, illuminating the dark deceit of autocrats. But the satire and humour of cartoonists has a higher purpose than mockery. Rather, it serves as a criticism of the negligent handling of Covid (<https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2021/07/21/is-it-time-to-stop-obsessing-about-covid/>). Kichka, who sadly lost his father to coronavirus in April 2020, spoke to me about how he has depicted the virus in his work. Through a kind of personification of the virus, he has been able to discuss it whilst retaining the gift of subtext. Rather than spelling out to the audience that he is talking about the virus, he, like others, has depicted the virus as a spherical entity with various ‘nodes’ poking out.

Covid, Cartoons, and Freedom

To Kichka, cartoonist criticism of Covid handling is proof that we live in a democracy that allows us to express dissenting opinions. The continuation of satire and humour at the ‘expense’ of the virus and governments shows that freedom of expression is still breathing.

(c) Kichka (Israel) – Cartooning for Peace

But are the anxieties around freedom of speech and expression justified? It is initially difficult to believe that the freedom of artists has worsened since the epoch of Hogarth, and to an extent this is true. Conversely, the broad expansion of technology has introduced new dichotomies cartoonists must consider. One difficulty raised by Kichka was the expansion of one’s audience. Hogarth was popular across continental Europe; nowadays, a reader in Asia can consume the content of a European within seconds of it being put online. Kichka commented on how this impacts cartoons. The moment a cartoon is published and becomes accessible to a reader, the reader can understand and interpret it as they please. ‘Humour is not universal’, notes Kichka. Nor are people’s sensibilities — and this can vary between two individuals, let alone different cultures.

Charlie Hebdo and Beyond

This difficulty takes on a more harrowing image in light of situations such as the Charlie Hebdo (<https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2015/01/12/bonjour-mon-dieu-je-suis-charlie-charlie-hebdo-cartoonists-deserve-pantheon/>) terrorist attack. In 2015, for its depiction of the Prophet Muhammad, the publication was targeted by terrorists. Twelve people died in the tragedy. Charlie Hebdo is known in France for its controversial cartoons, though its depictions never aim to be offensive for the purpose of offending. Rather, as since-deceased cartoonist Stephane Charbonnier commented two years before the attack, the aim (with regards to Prophet Muhammad images) was to render Islam ‘as banal as Catholicism’ (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/france-even-more-fractured-after-the-charlie-hebdo-rampage-1.2893262>). It was a simple message of secularism, yet cartoonists paid with their lives for expressing a general point of view. At the end of the day, as Kichka notes succinctly: ‘cartoonists are not creating news or problems, they are simply reacting to them’.

Charlie Hebdo is at the extreme end of what Kichka feared: virtual lynchings and ‘cutting our own wings’. It is crucial for cartoonists to be free to comment on society. Their commentary serves a purpose beyond bringing smiles and providing critique. In the case of Hogarth, his work gives us a glimpse into 18th century


Britain: what was valued, people’s sense of humour, and what was considered controversial. Similarly, we must support the rights of cartoonists of our time so that posterity can have a glimpse into the past and what mattered.

The doors of the internet have been flung open, welcoming new audiences to the world of political cartoons — each with varying susceptibilities. This is the world cartoonists, artists, writers and all digital creators must adjust to. The technological revolution is not going away. The doors cannot be sealed.

Interview conducted by William Speakman (Young Writer for Shout Out UK), as part of the GCRF-funded and AHRC-funded research on Covid in Cartoons (<https://le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons>), in collaboration with Cartooning for Peace (<https://www.cartooningforpeace.org/presentation/?lang=en>) and Shout Out UK (<https://www.shoutoutuk.org/>). Published also here (<https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2021/10/27/cartooning-a-delicate-art-form-that-needs-to-be-preserved/>)

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