

# 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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## A Cartoon Paints a Thousand Words: An Interview with Yemi (<https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons/2021/12/28/a-cartoon-paints-a-thousand-words-an-interview-with-yemi/>)

Posted by fl47 ([https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/covid-in-cartoons/author/fransiska\\_louwagie/](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, 9:22 pm)

When cartoons are mentioned, one's mind often wanders to shows like *The Simpsons* and to Marvel comic books. One does not tend to think of serious humanitarian issues. Despite the fact that political cartooning is prevalent in the West, cartoons are widely perceived as children's entertainment — though some would disagree with that. Addis Ababa-based cartoonist (that's Ethiopia, in case you're wondering), Yemsrach Yetneberk, simply known as 'Yemi', believes their potential is far greater than this. In Ethiopia — where cartoons are generally taken less seriously — she strongly believes that they can be an effective tool to further humanitarian causes, fight division, and counter the plague of misinformation that is proliferating globally.

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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### ***A Picture Can Say It Better***

When interviewed recently, Yemi effusively spoke of the power of cartoons and their many strengths. She spoke of how their colourful nature and bold aesthetic gives them a stronger edge over regular drawings or a piece of text. Combine this with the fact that cartoons can portray a complex message through a simple image, it is easy to understand why Yemi feels that they have a universal appeal, both geographically and demographically.

Cartooning has a further advantage; the fact that cartoons are not bounded by reality. Simple line drawings can appeal to the imagination without protest in a way other mediums cannot. As Yemi says: ‘the sun can rise in the West, and nobody cares’. This makes them a powerful educational tool, as they can encapsulate a multitude of ideas within a single image. Take for instance Yemi’s Hydra. In one simple image that uses a globally recognised icon, she highlights the multitude of problems that Ethiopia’s Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-43567007>), has to face.

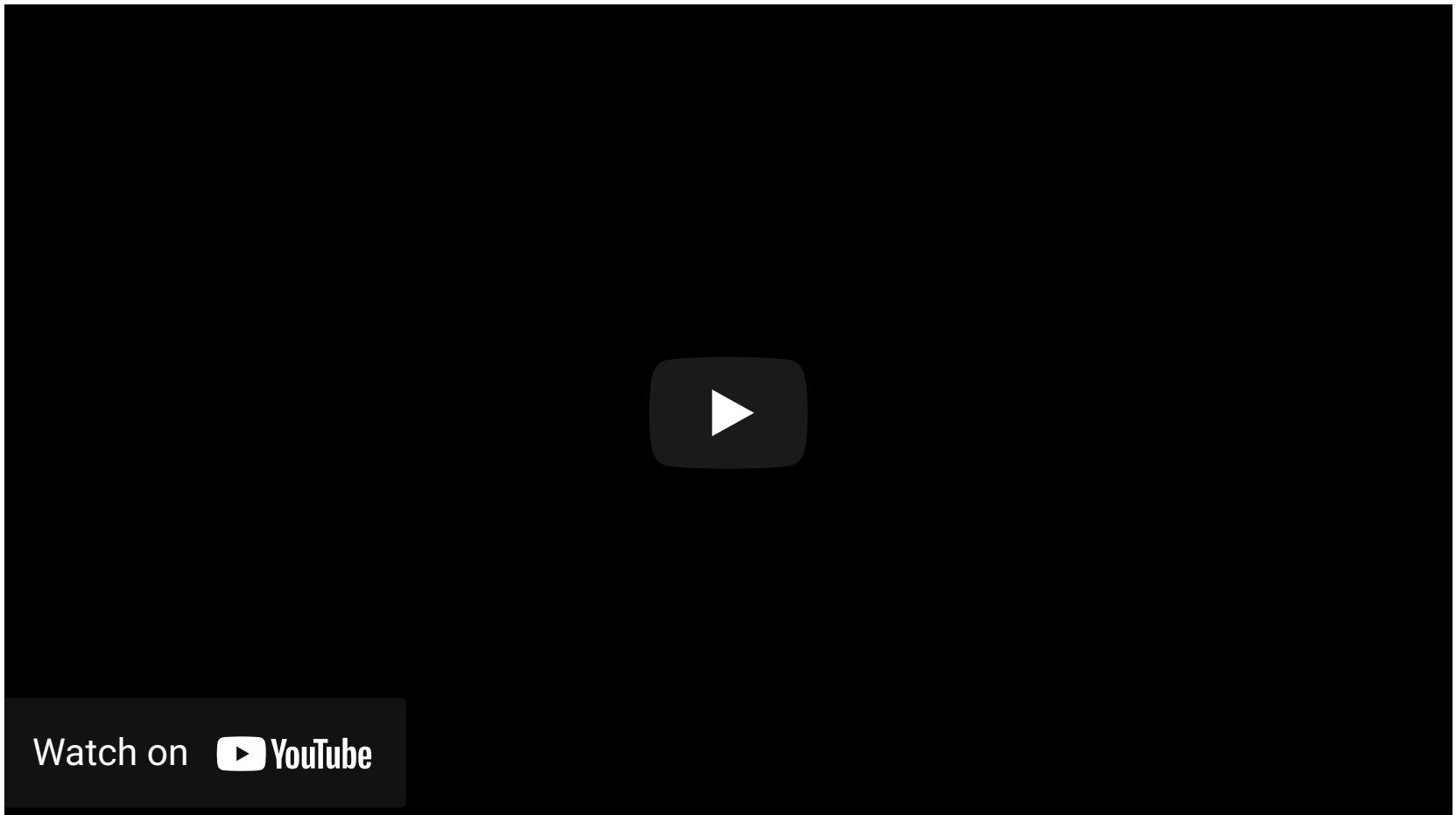
Even so, Yemi does not seek to dismiss the fact that cartoons have their weaknesses. Most notably, they face the challenge of being taken out of context and perceived as offensive, even if this was not the intention of the creator. This is a problem Yemi frequently wrestles with. She looks to use her cartoons as tools to spread unity, therefore she chooses her imagery very carefully to avoid causing offence. Despite this, there have been occasions in the past when her work caused friction.

The biggest problem for Yemi, however, is that cartoons are not taken seriously — especially in her native Ethiopia. Generally, it’s felt that they cannot present complex and important issues in a way that is suitable. But this is not the case. Political cartoonists have proved time and again that they can effectively capture the moment in a single drawing. However, it will take time and a concerted effort to change longstanding perceptions.

### ***Cartoons as A Force for Good***

In the meantime, Yemi is not deterred. She continues to use her cartoons as a force for good. Primarily, they are a medium for advocacy work, usually used in collaboration with NGOs. Her repertoire is broad: she covers a myriad of issues such as human rights, women’s rights, environmental concerns, public health, peace and security. She is keen to stress that her cartoons are not reflective of her opinion. Instead, Yemi aims to capture the objective reality of present society. Her opinion stays immaterial so that her work can truthfully reflect a wider spectrum of social issues and bring attention to them.

That's why two years ago Yemi began working for Cartooning for Peace (<https://www.cartooningforpeace.org/en/dessinateurs/yemi/>), an organisation formed in 2006 following the UN's 'Unlearning Tolerance' initiative. Based in France, it has 225 cartoonists from 69 different countries. The aim is to promote the work of its members through various books, exhibitions, and news articles (<https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2021/07/22/gb-news-caught-in-a-catch-22-of-its-own-making/>), whilst also providing support for when they face political persecution. At its core, Cartooning for Peace wants to use cartoons as educational tools to spread a culture of debate and tolerance, address issues in society, confront taboos, and provide the necessary understanding to appreciate cartoons. Most recently, this has led to a collaborating with Shout Out UK on the 'Covid in Cartoons' (<https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2021/04/09/covid-cartoons-young-people-caption-coronavirus-with-political-cartoons-one-frame-at-a-time/>) campaign. It is a mini course in which Cartooning for Peace's professional cartoonists help young people to create and read cartoons. It is hoped that, as well as promoting a general dialogue and tolerance for diverse opinions, this will allow young people to bring their own experiences of the pandemic into the national narrative.



(c) Yemi (Ethiopia) – Cartooning for Peace

Video realised as part of the Covid in Cartoons #SOUKCartoonathon – Festival of Social Science

By utilising the strengths of cartoons, today's young generation can articulate their unique experiences in a novel way. This, in turn, can lay the foundation for a more balanced recovery in which all demographics are catered for.

A greater understanding and ability to cartoon can help the nation to build a better future, and, who knows, maybe a few young Yemis will emerge from the course.

*Interview conducted by Callum Hill (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/>).*

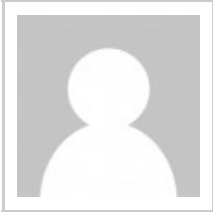
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