

## **Political Cartoons in the First Decade of the Millennium**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The beginning of the new millennium (the year 2000 to 2010) has witnessed a dramatic increase in the political cartoons' research. By their nature, political cartoons constitute a specific genre of political reporting in that they are pictorial representations which depict political and social issues and events, as well as the parties involved, in an immediate and condensed form. The genre is characterised by humorous depiction of events, exploiting the ability of irony and satire to unravel, ridicule and attack in a playful, witty and artful fashion (Test, 1991). They project a particular point of view (El Refaie, 2009) and enlighten readers on public issues while exposing wrong practices (Akande, 2002). Due to the increasing research on political cartoons, this study reviews previous studies conducted in the area from the beginning of the millennium (2000) to the year 2010 that marks the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century millennium. It is hoped that the review will highlight how the genre contributes to social and political commentary and to provide an inspiration for further research in political cartoons.

*Keywords:* Political cartoons, First Decade, Century Millennium, Media, Messages

### **INTRODUCTION**

This decade (provide years) has witnessed a considerable development of research in the area of political cartoons where many researchers have examined these cartoons from various perspectives. Now that the first decade of the century has come to an end, there is a need to review related literature in the area, considering its significant communicative purposes in societies. The

#### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 29 September 2011

Accepted: 20 April 2013

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year 2000 marked the beginning of the millennium. During this period, major events of global attention have occurred across the world. These events have tremendous impact on social and political dimension on the lives of peoples and societies today. For instance, the September 11 attack on the USA have triggered war against terrorism as the world's contemporary primordial policy. Obviously, the situation at hand needs important mode of communication that can succinctly deliver messages which summarizes contemporary societal issues that can easily be absorbed and processed by audiences in order to create meaning for them and keep informed about such issues in different contextual backgrounds.

Political cartoons therefore, are a form of media message that harnesses linguistic and nonlinguistic devices used not only as vital instruments of information dissemination reflecting social practices and happenings, but also as a principal means of public access by which the public participates in the societal wider spectrum of debate about a particular event or social phenomenon (Giarelli and Tulman, 2003). Political cartoons have been used to uncover the reality of events in society. Moreover, cartoon messages have been manipulated to set political and social agenda in different societies across the world. To this effect, the review has explored various analytical frameworks which have been employed for examining how cartoons are ingeniously used to convey meanings. These frameworks of analyses include Critical Discourse Analysis, CDA hermeneutic and Semiotic Analysis.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to provide a succinct account of related previous research in this review, the method employed therefore, is to explore different variables that previous research have considered in describing the nature and function of political cartoons. In this context, the present study reviews relevant research conducted in the area of political cartoons across the world from the year 2000, which marked the beginning of the new millennium up to the year 2010 respectively, making a period of one decade. Thus, the review was aimed at synthesizing major themes, framework of analyses and overall findings of previous research within the stipulated period. This will provide an easy avenue for assessing the communicative roles of political cartoons as a medium of social practice and also to serve as an inspiration for further research in the area of political cartoons.

## **ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL CARTOONS**

In recent years, there have been considerable studies in literature which focused on the nature and functions of political cartoons. Several studies of political cartoons looked at their capability to effectively communicate social and political messages to mass audiences. These studies have been synthesized and grouped into related variables based on their overall findings:

- a.) Many studies focused on communicative functions of political cartoons. This variable posits that the cartoons are used as a vehicle for political communication.

In his study for instance, Streicher (1965 cited by Benoit, W.L, *et al.*, 2001) his findings indicated that visual messages are much more succinct and provide clear summary of an event or issue at hand as such, are given much preference over conventional media news. He claimed that cartoons help audiences to read news and to scan through the meaning of an issue or an event particularly those audiences who give much preference to visual news and those who have little time. He contended that political cartoons capability to comment on social and political issues make them a distinct medium that contributes significantly by facilitating effective communication.

In his study, Walker (2003) examined political cartoons in respect of political communication. He argued that the cartoons are used as a powerful weapon for communicating political issues for the fact that cartoon messages can easily be absorbed by audiences and transmitted in mass circulation. His findings indicated that political cartoons are of social importance because they are used in setting social agenda and provide satirical commentary aimed at transforming social and political norms of society.

In his research note on political cartoons, Minix (2004) explored the nature and conventions of political cartoon art. He also expounded cartoonists' talents and creativity in portraying issues of public interest in their depictions which exploit a wide range of visual rhetorics such as humor, blending and

exaggeration to communicate social issues in society. His findings indicated that visual rhetoric serve as a persuasive device that cartoonists use to convey messages.

In another study, Duus (2001) explored Japanese cartoons depictions where he examined the historical development of political cartoons in Japan. His findings indicated that political cartoons were used in Japanese media in a form of political critique. He added that political cartoons were used as a vehicle for expressing political opinion. This development came as a result of the emergence of an elite opposition to the government.

Generally, as a distinct media genre, political cartoons appeal to the minds of audience and at the same time challenge their communicative and interpretive competence. In this regard, El Refaie (2009) carried out a study on how readers interpret political cartoons. The result of the pilot study indicated that in the case of political cartoons, interpretation lie- solely on many different kinds of literacy including a familiarity with cartoon conventions and a broad knowledge of current affairs and the ability to draw conclusions or analogies. Therefore, the author challenges those who are of the opinion that cartoons are simple and easy to read. His findings suggest that even the highly educated audiences who are to some extent more informed about political issues need to put into play a whole range of literacies such as good analogies of idioms and metaphors as well as other linguistic skills in order to grasp fully the meanings conveyed in the cartoons. Given

their nature, cartoons depictions are usually satirical; their militant effects are just like that of armory used for launching attacks on the political leaders and the democratic process through pictorial depictions (Morris, 1992).

b.) Construction of ideologies, social and political identities: Various studies have looked into this variable. Based on this variable, cartoons can also be explored to constitute identity of a particular group of people. For instance, Medubi (2003) examined language and ideology in Nigerian political cartoons, where he applied metaphor theory known as the conceptual integration theory in the analysis of the cartoons in the Nigerian social and political context. His findings indicated that the interplay between images and words cues in the cartoons that portray group ideologies. These group ideologies are given much priority over national interest and projected Nigeria as a nation without a clearly defined ideology as a result of colonially inherited problem which is the conglomeration of many ethnic groups of culturally diverse origin.

In another study, Najjar (2007) conducted an exploratory study of the most popular Palestinian cartoonist, Naji al-Ali. The author contends that cartoons are essential sites for the construction of people's identity, which he refers to the "identity of the self and others" (p. 256). He used a combined approach extracted from various analytical perspectives such as cognition,

social psychology, anthropology and the cartoon code. However, the researcher did not provide adequate explanation of the code as an important semiotic concept; and this hinders proper understanding of the cartoons' messages. The term code as Fiske (1982) defines it, simply refers to "a system of meaning common to members of a culture" (p. 20). The code comprises both the sign and the convention for interpreting that sign. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates the influence of the cartoon as a medium of political expression in the Arab world. In fact, the study claims that cartoons offer a unique form of social and political commentary specifically to the cartoonist and his society in general. Thus, the claim is constructive for the fact that the cartoon samples in the study vividly portray self-identity by easily depicting identifiable features of Palestinian refugees such as clothing styles, related artifacts, shape and size of body (physique) as well as mode of behavior and body images which are so revelatory in representing Palestinian people and their culture.

c.) The Influence of Political cartoons on public opinions: Political cartoons can be a powerful weapon in influencing public opinion pertaining to issues of public interest such as audiences' views on candidates especially during campaign and voting period. This variable indicates the persuasive power of the cartoons, because the point they are making can be quickly transmitted and absorbed by the audience. On this account, Connors (2005) explored

political cartoons and the popular culture in the 2004 American presidential campaigns. He claims that political cartoons are used as tools for manipulating voters' opinion on the candidates captured in a single cartoon message during the campaign period. This demonstrates that political cartoons are unique forms of media messages that have strong impact on the audience in terms of public opinion making. Furthermore, the in-depth analysis of cartoons in the study has really demonstrated that political cartoon can be harnessed and monopolized through its specific messages to form formidable and elaborate campaign machinery in a period of elections.

Considering their influence on public opinion, Hogan (2001) examined political cynicism in political cartoons. He observed that there is a lack of balance in visual comment on politics in political cartoons. Cartoons that merely describe politicians and political institutions do not appear in his analysis of the cartoons perhaps due to the fact that they are not humorous and satirical. Although satire is essential, the level at which politicians and politics are negatively depicted will have serious repercussions to democratic societies like political cynicism which will result in high level of abstention from voting and distrust on democratic system and lead audiences to resort to violence, hatred or even civil war.

Political cartoons function as a medium representing the response of a particular group over sensitive issues. For instance,

Townsend *et al.* (2008) explored the nature of political cartoons at a time of major political and social reform specifically on how political, satirical cartoons illustrated Australia's *WorkChoices* debate using cartoon images published in mainstream Australian newspaper. The researchers have employed qualitative methods where cartoon samples were categorized into tone and content categories. Cartoons' content depicted many issues on the newly introduced industrial relation laws in Australia at that time (specify time period). The findings indicated that political cartoons formed significant part of political discourse and a medium through which important debate on industrial reform was presented to Australian workers and the general public (source).

In his recent study, El Refaie (2010) explores young people's responses to political cartoons published in newspapers. He claims that newspaper cartoons are part of multimodal texts because they combine verbal and visual semiotic mode in creating and conveying meaning. The researcher piloted the use of newspaper cartoons as a means for soliciting young people's views concerning the meanings of the cartoons. The findings indicated that the young peoples' opinion can be influenced through the cartoons' messages and interpreting multimodal text is often more complex than comprehending verbal texts.

Frameworks for analyzing Political cartoons: In terms of framework of analysis, different analytical frameworks have been used to examine political cartoons, such as

hermeneutic analysis that has been used by political cartoon researchers to interpret political cartoons. For instance, Diamond (2002) studied cartoons depictions of post-September 11 attack. He used a text-oriented hermeneutic interpretation to examine themes of the cartoons. He found that cartoons are used to reveal a number of frequent themes such as description of events related to 11 September and issues in the aftermath of the attack.

In another study, (Benoit *et al.* (2001) explored and analyzed 2000 political cartoons concerning Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr affair which concentrated on the investigations, impeachment and trial of President Clinton. The analytical framework used for the analysis was a fantasy theme analysis of political cartoons using symbolic convergence theory. Thus, it is a tool for assessing rhetorical discourse with emphasis on the visual message that provides basis for the analysis of imaginative language and imagery usually embedded in the cartoons. The analysis demonstrated that political cartoons are complex visual or symbolic discourses which employ rhetorical devices that require rhetorical analysis in order to make sense of the messages and their impact on the public.

Taking into account the influence of the political cartoons, Seymoure-ure (2001) predicted the future of British political cartoons. He analyzed the depictions of party leaders in the 1997 general election in the UK and categorized the dominant images. Tracing the development of cartoons' traditions in respect of changes in the size

and design of newspapers as well as the influence of the political culture and the cartoons ability of conveying the unsayable through its depictions of visual images, the author claimed that political cartoons will continue to flourish in Britain and in her future.

Correspondingly, in recent times, researchers have contemporarily started to employ various approaches in analyzing how political cartoons operate. In society these include semiotics, content and document analysis, rhetorical and narrative analyses. The review has explored studies that were conducted using these analyses. Similarly, semiotics seeks to address media texts using repetitive signs for meaning production. Thus, semiotic analysis "focuses on the system of rules governing the implied discourse involved in media texts and stresses on the role of hermeneutic content in shaping meaning" (Wollacott, 1982, pp.93-94).

In her study, El Refaie (2003) incorporated semiotics to investigate the concept of visual metaphor in newspaper cartoons using in Australian newspaper cartoons. He argued that visual metaphors cannot be expressed precisely in formal terms only. Rather, they must be seen as visual representations of metaphorical thoughts or concepts. Taking into consideration the method of analysis, the author has clearly demonstrated that visual metaphors are described in terms of the visual mode particularly in newspaper cartoon. He also suggests that "visual metaphors are best described in terms of



their underlying metaphorical concepts” (El Refaie, 2003, p.75). Thus, cartoons as pictorial representations portray the real-life events through comparison into condensed graphical form that can only be understood and interpreted by the public when they map on the visual depictions contained in the cartoons with the real-life events and this is the cognitive process through which metaphors convey meanings.

Cognitive approach is another framework used by Bergen (2003) where he focused on cognition and culture in the analysis of September 11 political cartoons. He identified cognitive mechanisms as: conceptual blending, conceptual metaphor and cultural models. His findings indicated that cognitive mechanisms play vital roles in reflecting social events by revealing significant similarities in the cartoons through which audiences can easily understand at the moment of such events. Moreover, they appear to interact in political cartoons much easier than they do in language due to visual reifications of these mechanisms. Therefore, cognitive mechanisms make cartoon messages more accessible to audiences through reification of relatively abstract concepts in visible and easily recognizable concrete domains.

In another study, Tsakona (2009) used multimodal theory of humor as an analytical framework to study language and image interaction in cartoons. The author indicated that cartoon humor is a complex process that involves different mechanisms of language interplay between verbal and nonverbal devices such as exaggeration, contradiction

and metaphor. Unlike what others consider, cartoons are not so easy to grasp. Therefore, people need to pay close attention to both verbal and visual details contained in each cartoon. However, the general theory of verbal humor employed by the researcher is too broad to give an elaborate account of humor based on the visual depictions in the cartoons. Usually, the pleasure in political cartoon as described by Press (1981) is specifically derived from the joy of sticking pins into fools and villains or watching others doing it the humor is so surprising and ridiculous as such, incongruent theory might be more appropriate for the analysis of the cartoon in the study.

In addition, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has also been used for the study of political cartoons. For example, Mazid (2008) examined Bush and bin Laden cartoons using CDA and semiotic-discursive aspects as analytical method. The author demonstrates that cartoons can be used to present ideological differences between opposing parties or societies. He achieved this through depicting two repugnant enemies in person of Bush’s administration representing the west, who was portrayed as a devil and at the same time his Western ideologies as equally devilish; bin Laden on the other side represented the Middle-East, who was portrayed as a terrorist and his ideological beliefs were presented as that of the terrorists. Therefore, using CDA provides in a communicative interaction, a framework of analyzing cartoons to express information, ideology and properties capable of effectively conveying implicit

and explicit meaning to the target audience. Political cartoons possess linguistic features which are used for constructing ideologies and social identities reflecting real-life events in the political arena of a society (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999).

From the African perspective, Eko (2007) investigated how African newspapers dehumanized and deterritorialized four African political leaders in the post-cold war era. The author analyzed post-cold war cartoon depictions of power abuse by four typical African leaders. The study is a typical African narrative style which is a kind of mythology characterized by the use of some animals that are given human attributes to represent humans. It is a satirical narration whereby human beings are animalized, in other words, humans are brought out as animals in order to reveal their brutal nature with the aim of satirizing them. Similarly, they are in some instances deterritorialized, in the sense that they are taken out of their natural domains or environments symbolically for the purpose of denouncing their extra-authoritarian leadership (Eko, 2007). To this effect, the author used animalization and deterritorialization as counter-discourses to project the concept of authoritarianism as animalistic and self-destructive. He incorporated the analytical framework of Foucault's concept of governmentality which is a construct that refers to the relationship between the government and the governed characterized by abuse of power on the part of the government and attempts by the governed to reduce or overcome that

abuse (Foucault, 1994c, p.785; Monga, 1996, p.56). Even though the researcher explored how some African leaders were dehumanized in some African newspapers, his concept of governmentality did not adequately address the written captions of the cartoons that formed one of the central questions which led to his research.

In another study, Udoakah (2006) used Uses and Gratifications Theory as theoretical framework to examine the political cartoon readership in the Nigerian context. He verified the claim made by editors and cartoonist in Nigeria that cartoons are alternative forms of communication meant for the lowly educated and illiterate. Interestingly, the findings indicated that the readership was made up of elites or educated and politically conscious class contrary to the commonly held view that cartoons are largely meant for the illiterates and low educated class. He demonstrated that apart from literacy, many things are required from the audience members to understand political cartoons. He was of the contention that for better comprehension and interpretation of cartoons, one needs to have a sense of humor, knowledge on current political issues and historical background of the society. However the researcher did not provide clear theoretical explanation of his framework of uses and gratification theory, which is a theory attempts to explain the uses and functions of media and how readers actively look for specific media to satisfy specific needs. This is the major weakness of the study given the fact that his claims were based on the theoretical assumptions.



## DISCUSSION

To this effect, in the studies reviewed, different analyses for studying political cartoons have been explored. These include content analysis which is used for evaluating numerically dominant tendencies in political cartoons. Fantasy Theme Analysis is another analytical framework used for assessing rhetorical discourse. Moreover, humor which is an essential human attribute has been used as framework of analysis in form of multimodal theory. In addition, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and semiotic-discursive approach has been used as frameworks of analysis. For instance, Mazid (2008) used this analysis analytical framework to examine Bush and bin Laden cartoons. Eko, (2007) incorporated Foucault's concept of governmentality to analyze political cartoons depictions of African leaders. Given a few studies in literature on political cartoons, Taking into consideration the Nigerian context, there is a need for more research paucity of research in the area of political cartoons. However, Udoakah (2006) employed Uses and Gratification theories as a theoretical framework to investigate the political cartoons readership in Nigeria.

In terms of analytical framework used in the analysis of political cartoons, semiotic analysis is so pertinent in providing an in-depth interpretation of cartoons. Semiotics was used to analyze the cartoon text which is regarded as a sign. Semioticians study signs as part of semiotic sign systems such as medium or genre. The main concern of semiotics in this context is meaning-making

and representation specifically in the form of texts and media (Chandler 2002). A text in this context refers to the assemblage of signs such as words, images and sounds created and interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a specific medium of communication. For semioticians, a text can exist in any medium and can be verbal, nonverbal, or both. Political cartoons are media texts that contain both verbal and non-verbal devices.

In summary, the review highlights several studies which have been conducted in political cartoons focusing on different variables. Some studies focused on the nature and functions of political cartoons, while others looked into the visual projections and how issues are encapsulated in cartoons. Similarly, communicative functions of political cartoons have been explored such as their ability to satirize and ridicule political figures and their bad policies. Finally, the review is aimed at establishing a niche as well as inspiration for further research in political cartoon literature.

## CONCLUSION

This review provides an overview of various studies conducted on political cartoons. In fact, from the examined previous research, it becomes evident that political cartoons rely heavily on the interplay between images and words specific language use especially satire as a tool to communicate social and political messages. Thus, through creative combination of images and words, satire, political cartoons have the potentials of entertaining and informing the public on

current issues. The cartoons can also be used to criticize vice and folly as a way of transforming society and its polity. As such, they are used as agents of social and political reforms in society. In addition, political cartoons serve as the mirror of society reflecting its social happenings and practices. Considering their increase use in media, political cartoons constitute a vital social discourse that mediates media and society thereby contributing to political communication, social debate and commentary. Despite the fact that political cartoons rely on satire as a linguistic weapon to critique politicians and authorities and communicate effectively, the reality of issues and events, existing studies have not yet explored how satire is used; neither does it examine linguistic and nonlinguistic devices employed for creating and conveying satire in political cartoons. It could be argued from the review that political cartoons play a vital communicative role through which the general public is informed, and reoriented on contemporary social issues affecting the society. Thus, this study responds to the call for further studies by political cartoons academics who have suggested that research about political cartoons has been overlooked for far too long (Walker, 2003; El Refaie 2003; Udoakah 2006). Further research should focus on the role of satire in satirical representation of social and political issues in political cartoons using multiple analytical frameworks. for analyzing political cartoons because it has been identified that previous studies have mainly focused on one analytical framework.

Considering the polysemous nature of political cartoons, one analytical framework is not adequately enough to provide exhaustive analysis and interpretation of messages depicted in the cartoons. Therefore, considering the identified gap in political cartoon literature; this review has the potential to provide an inspiration for further research which might bring theoretical and analytical understanding of political cartoon genre which has become a vital medium of communication in diverse social and political contexts.

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