

Cartoon journalism in Africa puts political power into perspective

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Cartoonists from seven African countries gathered at the University of Botswana, 8-10 November 2000, to discuss common issues, share the secrets of their profession and talk about the possibility of setting up an association of African cartoonists. The first of its kind in the region, the 'Cartoon Journalism' workshop was organised by the Department of Sociology of the University of Botswana, and jointly sponsored by the University of Botswana and WACC.

Cartoonists from South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania attended this international workshop. Keynote speakers were South Africa's Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro), cartoonist for the Sowetan, Sunday Times and Mail and Guardian, and Dr John A. Lent, Professor of Communications at Temple University, Philadelphia, USA. Dr Lent is editor of the International Journal of Comic Art and is recognised as one of the world's leading authorities on the subject. Alongside his numerous books and articles derived from interviews with cartoonists all over the world, he is the author a massive bibliography of cartoonists and comic strip creators, comprising some 35,000 citations.

Opening the conference, Dr Lent shared some of the insights he has gained from his globetrotting cartoon research. The experiences of cartoonists in other countries, many working under oppressive regimes, helped those present to see their work in a global context. Cartoons have played an important role in liberation struggles world-wide and cartoonists have used a variety of inventive strategies to get their messages across despite censorship and repression. Some cartoonists are so popular that their status provides them with a measure of immunity from the heavy hand of the politicians and generals they ridicule, but mostly, humour is their best defence. Like the court jesters of old, cartoonists get to say what otherwise may not be said, albeit in subtle ways.

Zapiro described how he grapples with the issues of the day, often forced by his conscience to give vent to unpopular sentiments. A staunch supporter of the South African liberation movement, he now often has to choose between his loyalty to the ANC and his need to criticise the inadequacies and excesses of the present government. His unerring response to issues of national concern has made him one of South Africa's foremost political commentators.

Other South Africans at the workshop were Johannesburg-based Alastair Findlay, who produces a weekly editorial cartoon for City Press and a range of comic strips for various publications, Napier Dunn, daily cartoonist on The Mercury (Durban), educational comics publisher Neil Napper of the Storyteller Group (Cape Town) and Andy Mason of Artworks Publishing (Durban). Botswana was represented by a number of cartoonists including Modirwa Kwekaletswe and Billy Chiepe (Chomi), of the Gaborone newspaper Mmegi, Vusi Nyoni, who works as a graphic designer at the Botswana Technology Centre in Gaborone and Lazarous Chanda, a schoolteacher who produces satirical fine art watercolours.

Zimbabwe was represented by Innocent Mpfu of Zimbabwe Newspapers, Swaziland by Thulani Mthethwa of The Guardian of Swaziland, Malawi by Deguzman Kaminjolo of the Daily Times & Malawi News, Zambia by Trevor Ford of The Post and Monitor, and Tanzania by David Chikoko, cartoonist on The Guardian of Tanzania and Titus Kaguo, production editor of the Business Times of Tanzania.

Each participant presented a short overview of their work, against the backdrop of the prevailing political, economic and social conditions in their respective countries. Several common themes emerged from the presentations, but censorship – both in its direct and indirect forms – was the issue that elicited the most vociferous debate. A key objective of the workshop was to stimulate discussion about the idea of regional association of cartoonists. Such a body could benefit

cartoonists by facilitating networking across geographical divides; providing opportunities for cross-pollination, training and the development of new talent; assisting cartoonists with problems relating to copyright and intellectual property; and, possibly most importantly, performing an advocacy function on behalf of cartoonists who find themselves in hot water as a result of their satirical activities.

The first step towards realising these objectives was taken with the formation of a working group comprising all the participating cartoonists. Provisionally called 'Africa Ink: Cartoonists Working Group', its purpose will be to provide a platform from which the idea of a sub-continental association of cartoonists can be advanced. The participants were tasked with returning to their countries to mobilise their fellow cartoonists to become part of the initiative.

Everyone agreed that the initiative was long overdue. For most, it was the first time they had met so many of their peers. Though they may live and work under very different conditions, cartoonists everywhere are clearly united by common experiences, not least of which is the eternal search for a great, pithy image that sums up its subject with power and wit. Some complained of unsympathetic editors who are empowered to squash an idea for the wrong reasons, others of the isolation of long hours at the drawing board, marginalised from the camaraderie of the newsroom. Translating political events and social challenges into the unique language of cartooning requires talent and a lot of hard work. For the creators of daily and weekly editorial cartoons, the pressure seldom lets up.

The dedication required of the successful cartoonist was admirably displayed by Zapiro, whose workload requires him to produce six cartoons a week, four for the Sowetan, and one each for the Sunday Times and Mail and Guardian. After a long day of conferencing, during which he delivered an intriguing lecture about his methods and techniques, Zapiro rushed back to his room at the modest suburban lodge in Gaborone where the cartoonists were accommodated, to produce his weekly cartoon for the Sunday Times. While his colleagues settled down to an evening of cool beers and tall stories, the eminent satirist sat hunched over his makeshift drawing table, stripped down to his shorts against the fierce Botswana heat, grumbling incoherently, his pen whipping rapidly across the page. The result: a hilarious take on the anticlimactic impasse of the U.S. presidential election, rushed in frantic haste to the fax machine at the Botswana Sun hotel to take its place in the nick of time on the Sunday pages.

Censorship and press freedom

For the South Africans, it was sobering to realise that the freedom they enjoy today is far from the norm in sub-Saharan Africa. Censorship is still a very real problem for many, although it often takes the shape of more subtle forms of self-censorship by newspaper managers and owners. It soon became clear that a healthy culture of political cartooning and satire requires some measure of press freedom in order to exist. Cartooning relies on caricature to get its message across, and the purpose of caricature is to ridicule and demean those in positions of wealth and power. Accentuating the ugliest physical characteristics of eminent personages may be highly subversive – a blow struck against the establishment on behalf of the powerless and the anonymous – as in Zapiro's famous cartoon of a naked Robert Mugabe as the emperor with no clothes.

The licence enjoyed by cartoonists to caricature and parody public figures is therefore an indicator of a fairly robust democratic culture and certainly does not prevail in all countries. Swazi cartoonist Thulani Mthethwa reported that it is considered 'in poor taste' and 'anti-Swazi' to portray King Mswati II in cartoons, and is simply not allowed. Innocent Mpofo, cartoonist on the Herald of Zimbabwe, felt it would be imprudent for him to attend sessions where Zapiro was presenting, because of the latter's unflattering portrayals of Mugabe. Mpofo is not allowed to employ caricature in his work and restricts himself to broad social themes.

Cartoonists flourish best where the press is relatively free. Malawian cartoonist Deguzman Kaminjolo described the flowering of political cartooning in his country during the heady days of 1993 and 1994, when Hastings Banda was forced by a withdrawal of foreign aid to submit to a

national referendum and election, both of which he lost. Opportunities for emerging cartoonists were created by a new spirit of openness and critique, reflected in a rapid proliferation of independent newspapers. According to Kaminjolo, some 20 Malawian cartoonists emerged to celebrate previously unknown levels of freedom of expression, and it was not uncommon for political cartoons to appear on the front pages of the independent papers. Today, the Malawian independents are no more, the cartoonists who enjoyed momentary prominence have disappeared back into obscurity, and journalists look back with nostalgia on that brief period of press freedom and political vitality.

Interestingly, both Zambia and Tanzania enjoy vigorous cartooning cultures. Zambian cartoonist Trevor Ford (Yuss) is a Welshman from Cardiff who has lived and worked there for the last 33 years. As cartoonist on the Post of Zambia, his acerbic pen has enjoyed the freedom to record the country's travails, despite its steadily failing currency and declining standard of living. A born raconteur, he relocated to Zambia as an art teacher at a time when a kwacha would have cost you a dollar and a half. Today, with 2,500 kwachas to the dollar, one of his biggest problems is obtaining drawing materials. Nevertheless, his humour sustains him and his countless anecdotes shed satirical light on the political processes of post-colonial Africa. Like the story of the Minister of Agriculture who delayed reporting of an outbreak of swine fever just long enough to take out insurance on the many pigs on his farm. Yuss's response: a terrible pun about a policeman threatening a pig: "We have ways of making you pork!"

The evidence presented by Tanzanian cartoonist David Chikoko of the extremely healthy state of cartooning in his country was perhaps the greatest revelation of the workshop. Tanzania's first multiparty elections were held in 1995 and the democratically elected Benjamin Mkapa, an ex-journalist himself, has always held cartoonists in high esteem. According to Chikoko, he has been caricatured so often that he is reported to have quipped: "I can't even remember my own face!"

Almost all 11 Tanzanian dailies use strips and political cartoons and the country has about a dozen humour periodicals. There are 20 or more active cartoonists working in Dar es Salaam alone, mostly on Swahili papers. One paper, Sanifu, a recreational tabloid, is more than half-filled with cartoon strips, rendered in a variety of styles, all in Swahili. Chikoko says that most of the cartoonists work in the vernacular and that few of the English language papers carry cartoons. When questioned about the inspiration behind his decision to pursue cartooning as a career, he revealed that as the son of a schoolteacher, he had had an unusually literary childhood. His early comics reading consisted of Beano, Tintin and Asterix, purchased for him by his father from the local bookshop.

The state of South African cartooning

The Tanzanian example threw into harsh relief the absence of black South African cartoonists at the workshop. Despite a vigorous cartooning tradition that goes back to the turn of the 20th century, when satirical papers like *The Zingari*, *Lantern* and *Knobkerrie* flourished at the Cape, few, if any, black cartoonists have achieved prominence in South Africa. Cartoons and comic strips in the country's black papers and magazines have, with a few exceptions, been created by white cartoonists. Perhaps the best known of these is Len Sak, whose character Jojo was a feature of papers like *World* and *Weekend World*, and later the *Sowetan*, for decades. The contributions of artists like Mogorosi Motshumi, whose comic strip *Sloppy* appeared in the literacy magazine *Learn and Teach* throughout the 1980s, and Mzwakhe Nhlabathi, whose work appeared in *Upbeat* magazine during the same period, have remained largely unrecognised by the broader public.

Neil Verlaque-Napper, an educational comics publisher, told the workshop how his company, the Storyteller Group, trained a cadre of black comic strip illustrators who were teamed up with writers to produce comic books about democracy, AIDS, community development and other social issues in the early 1990s. Napper remains committed to the vision of a popular South African visual literature, and envisages a time when popular indigenous comics will be sold by street vendors to a public eager for popular reading material. He is hopeful that the designation by education

minister Kader Asmal of 2001 as 'The Year of Reading' may stimulate interest in comic stories as a means of promoting 'a reading culture' amongst a population that barely reads.

According to Johannesburg cartoonist Alistair Findlay, City Press is the only South African paper that does not use syndicated cartoons from the U.S., preferring to support the development of local cartoonists, and Mogorosi Motshumi and several other black cartoonists publish their work there. The use by local papers of cheap internationally syndicated material was cited by several workshop participants as one of the major reasons for the failure of indigenous cartoons and comic strips to break into the mainstream. Syndicated strips, with their tried and tested formulae, are presumably cheaper and more convenient than having to coach inexperienced and under-resourced local cartoonists. Those freelance cartoonists who succeed, like Findlay, generally cobble an income together by drawing from several different publications, working in a variety of styles and formats.

For less accomplished artists, making a living as a cartoonist is extremely difficult. One of the reasons for the emergence of indigenous cartoonists in Tanzania and other African countries may be that the currencies of these countries are so weak in dollar terms that it is cheaper for newspapers to buy their work than to opt for syndicated material. Or it may simply be that the existence of a vigorous vernacular newspaper publishing has allowed cartoonists working in the vernacular to flourish.

For the South Africans, the Botswana workshop brought several issues to the fore. Cartoonists and editors need to get together to think of ways to develop our own unique indigenous culture of cartooning. A recent initiative by the Sowetan, which launched a competition with a substantial cash prize to identify new cartooning talent, is a step in the right direction, and hopefully other South African papers will follow suit. As marginal and innocuous as they may seem, cartoons and comic strips are a barometer of the social and political climate of the environment from which they emerge. In simple, direct and often very funny messages, they tell an extraordinary amount about their time and place. Unfortunately, in South Africa, they still continue to tell a story of racial exclusion.

If it helps to stimulate public interest and investment by the newspaper and publishing industries in the development of a vibrant cartooning culture in Southern Africa, the Botswana workshop will have succeeded admirably. If the momentum it has generated results in the formation of a workable and effective association of cartoonists across the region, this modest meeting of cartoonists and enthusiasts may one day be seen to have been truly historic.

Cartoonists, newspaper editors and others interested in finding out more about the Africa Ink Cartoonists Working Group are invited to contact Jonathan Shapiro: E-mail: zapiro@zapiro.com or Andy Mason: E-mail: artworks@iafrica.com.

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