

Views on the Impact of Editorial Cartoons

What impact do editorial cartoons published in newspapers and other media have? Analysts have seldom ventured to address this topic. The McCord Museum therefore decided to consult people in a position to know: cartoonists themselves. Chapleau, Aislin, Garnotte and Godin, whose drawings are featured in the virtual exhibition *Where to Draw the Line? Editorial Cartoons in Quebec, 1950-2000*, were asked, "What kind of impact does your work have, on a daily basis and in the longer term?" In response, they talked about the ties that bind them to their readers and recalled some of the reactions of politicians and journalists. Without providing any definitive answers, they offered some interesting insights into the realities of their unusual profession.

Public perception

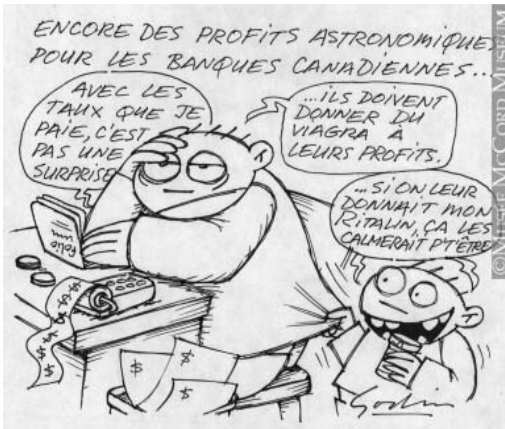
At La Presse since 1996, Serge Chapleau (born 1945) believes he enjoys a special relationship with the public. He says that most of the time, if he aims at the right place, he gets a smile out of the majority of his readers. "Making them feel better, comforting them. [...] We cheer each other up. It seems to me that when someone laughs, he's laughing with me, so there are two of us laughing together. We're a little bit more confident about our opinion. We don't feel we're all alone." And when asked whether his cartoons ever spark negative reactions from the people he depicts or from readers, he retorts that a cartoon is also supposed "to ruffle a few feathers!"

Aislin, whose real name is Terry Mosher (born 1942), has been a cartoonist for *The Gazette* since 1972. He sees himself as representing the person in the street, whose point of view he seeks to defend at times: "I think it is important to sympathize with the common point of view, because generally the less advantage the people have, the more disadvantaged they are, the less of a voice they have. So I think that any good cartoonist or commentator is going to try to keep that in mind and speak up for the smaller person when they can or they feel they should."

According to Éric Godin (born 1964), whose cartoons appeared in the weekly *Voir Montréal* from 1988 to 1999, on the *Sympatico* Web site in 1997 and in the business section of *La Presse* from 2003 to 2005, a cartoonist's work consists primarily in ridiculing absurd situations: "I have to react to idiocy, heavily underscore stupidity. And there'll never be a shortage of human stupidity!" He likes to think he makes a contribution to society's debates and considers a political cartoon to be a point of departure for a discussion. "Most of the time I look at things from the point of view of the average person."



M987.244.195 : *What Might Bug You in 1987?*, Aislin, 1986



M2002.132.150 : Banks still raking in record profits: Not surprising, considering the fees that I pay, Éric Godin, 1998

Michel Garneau (born 1951), pen name Garnotte, who has been with *Le Devoir* since 1996, says that a cartoonist works without any direct interaction with the public. Nevertheless, he often has the impression he is defending the standpoint of the average citizen or taxpayer. When the Gomery commission was holding its hearings, for instance, it seemed to him that "the real justice was being meted out by cartoonists." For some witnesses, he says, "the real punishment was to be the object of public ridicule week after week! At times we felt we could go much further than we could normally because our readers thought those people deserved a real shellacking."

Caricature -- a safety valve for political and social tension?

Cartoonists regularly receive feedback from the public: telephone calls or e-mail congratulating them or insulting them, prompted by an emotional reaction to a drawing. Chapleau gives the following example: "This morning, I drew a cartoon I was really happy with, and I got lots of e-mail and calls from people saying, 'I don't know how to draw, but that's exactly what I thought.'"

Aislin says that readers' reactions contribute to a debate characteristic of a free society: "It is very important to have this reaction because it engages the readers of the newspaper. And it adds to the public discussion. Whether readers like the cartoon or they don't like the cartoon, the important thing is that it is adding to the discussion of any particular issue. It is very important in a democracy. In a free society, we of course are allowed to do that sort of thing. And so usually, the freer the society, the more satirical you can be, and therefore that adds to the comment."

"What I liked the most," says Godin, "was the reactions I got. I had mothers who wrote to me saying: 'You get our teenagers to sit up and think. It's great. We were able to have a family discussion about such and such an issue that you raised.'" Among the many topics he has addressed, from religion to politics to the consumer society, Godin remembers one drawing in particular, in which a family living in a house built out of credit cards stared in horror as one of the walls collapsed. He wanted to wake people up to the dangers of excessive debt.

Besides giving readers something to laugh about and contributing to society's debates, can editorial cartoons reduce social and political tensions? Aislin notes that one of his most memorable cartoons was published when the Parti Québécois won the 1976 provincial election. Aiming at English-speakers stunned by the election result, he drew the new Quebec premier, René Lévesque, advising



P090-A_50-1004 : O.K. Everybody take a valium!, Aislin, 1976

them to take a Valium. Aislin thought it was important to put things into perspective: "I mean, this is not the end of the world. That's what it says."¹



M2007.69.193 : NDP rises up, Garnotte, 1997

Politicians who ask for more

Politicians feel the effects of caricature on a daily basis. "They congratulate us and shake our hands, but squeeze extra hard to try and break our fingers so we can't draw them anymore!" jokes Chapleau. Still, it seems that politicians don't really mind being a prime target that much. Some of them are even happy to be the laughingstock of the daily cartoon! "When you're the subject of a cartoon," says Garnotte, "then, generally speaking, you're the focus of the news. It means you've managed to steal the spotlight. It's a high point." In his view, public figures "are quite happy to be caricatured because it means

they've gained more political weight, they've become important enough that they're getting talked about." Curiously, sometimes people close to the subject even want to buy the cartoon, "as a souvenir!"

Aislin claims that, occasionally, a politician's advisers will make it known that they want him to be in a cartoon. "I have had executive assistants contacting me, saying: 'When are you going to put the minister in a cartoon?'"² However, he says that some of them enjoy the spotlight less than others: "The closer people are to a subject, the less of a sense of humour they have about it."

Notable drawings

Some cartoons crystallize public opinion so expertly that they become instant classics. Just think of Stéphane Dion, the former leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, depicted over and over again as a rat by Chapleau. Chapleau says that the first time he did the drawing, he showed it to Lise Bissonnette, the editor of *Le Devoir* at the time: "She said to me, 'Well, it's certainly funny, but don't draw him as a rat again.'" Yet it ended up being the first of a long series anyway! Alain Dubuc, former chief editorialist of *La Presse*, thinks that Chapleau was expressing something that a lot of people felt, and by persisting with it, he ended up shaping Dion's public image to a certain degree.³



M2005.166.9 : Stéphane Dion preens his image, Serge Chapleau, 1996

¹ *Nothing Sacred*, documentary by Garry Beitel, 2003

² *Dangerous When Provoked: The Life and Times of Terry Mosher*, documentary by John Curtin, 2006.

³ *Nothing Sacred*.

To publish or not to publish?

Are cartoonists ever afraid of being sued or of extreme reactions from the public, here or elsewhere? Sometimes they're asked to hold back on a drawing, but that kind of decision is never taken lightly.

Joan Fraser, former editor-in-chief of *The Gazette*, remembers refusing to publish an Aislin drawing portraying former Montreal mayor Jean Drapeau (1916-1999) as a pig, because she was afraid of a possible libel suit.⁴ Aislin himself recalls having to set aside a picture of Notre Dame Basilica decorated with swastikas that he had done when a Christian group fiercely opposed to gay rights came to Montreal. A drawing of an Islamic fanatic depicted as a dog, titled *Mad Dog, or In the Name of Islamic Extremism*, done in 1997 following a Middle Eastern attack that took many civilian lives, also had to be withdrawn from *The Gazette's* Web site. Aislin respects the paper's right of refusal, but he insists on his own right to draw whatever troubles him: "Hell, we have got to have the freedom to criticize this stuff."

Some editors do sometimes take the risk of publishing controversial caricatures. The 2005 publication of cartoons of Mohammed in Denmark showed that satirical drawings can even have tragic consequences. An agitator, Chapleau admits that he, too, did a drawing on the topic shortly after the events, but *La Presse* refused to publish it because of the explosive situation at the time. While understanding the reasons for the decision, Chapleau nevertheless included the sketch in his annual collection of cartoons. To show solidarity with his fellow cartoonists, he chose not to remain silent: "It's disturbing, because freedom of expression is at stake. We're close to being the last bastion of democracy. We do stupid things and make faces. We should at least have the courage to accept them."

When all is said and done

While the social impact of caricature is difficult to assess, it undeniably exists and is felt in many different ways. Whether a drawing is a sensation for just a day or takes hold in society's collective memory, cartoonists wield an influence that extends far beyond the confines of their drawing tables. This is precisely what makes them so formidable, according to Joan Fraser: "If you can create a shared view of the emperor having no clothes, the emperor is in serious trouble."

Yet cartoonists are just as paradoxical as they are critical. After all, they are the living proof that our societies are not quite as dreadful as they claim, since they have the freedom to poke fun at them virtually at will.

⁴ *Dangerous When Provoked: The Life and Times of Terry Mosher.*

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