

A "Zany" Development

Zany.

Is that a quality journalists should aspire to?

Walt Handelsman won his second Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning this year with this citation:

Awarded to Walt Handelsman of Newsday, Long Island, N.Y., for his stark, sophisticated cartoons and his impressive use of zany animation.

Handelsman's editorial cartoons speak for themselves. He does great work and is an old friend. Walt saw a new medium in animation and went to great pains to teach himself the fine points of producing it. And the results are predictably hilarious. But is it an editorial cartoon?

Let's put it this way; giving the Pulitzer Prize for an animated cartoon is like awarding it for best novel to Doctor Zhivago starring Omar Sharif. It's just not the same thing.

In an industry that seemingly has more awards per person than any other profession, the Pulitzer Prize is arguably the best known and most sought after. Try going into a bar and announce you just won the Fischetti and see how many folks buy you a drink.

We were led to believe that this is an award for the newspaper industry. Unless it's broken down and printed on every page so that you can view it as a flipbook, it's hard to imagine how an animated cartoon qualifies.

Winners in every category other than cartooning are lavished with words like sharply edged, creative, comprehensive, tenacious, skillful, and zestful. Brett Blackledge of my own home newspaper, The Birmingham News, won in the investigative journalism category for his remarkable series of articles unraveling the twisted web that had become the Alabama two-year college system that was described as "distinguished." No other category was branded as "zany." (Although that is one word to describe the antics of the Alabama two-year college system.) Bill Mauldin's weeping statue of Lincoln mourning the death of President Kennedy, Herblock's incessant attacks on Joe McCarthy and Richard Nixon, Tony Auth's scathing cartoons against the Vietnam War, Paul Conrad earning a place on Nixon's enemies list, Jeff MacNelly's subversively wry takes on Jimmy Carter. None of them described as zany.

What makes an editorial cartoon great, what makes it the thing readers turn to first on the editorial page is the unique ability of a well-conceived and well-executed cartoon to cut

through the spin. To slash through the deliberate fog that politicians create and get to the hard and often uncomfortable nub of an issue. They may take a comic turn but in their black hearts, they are not zany. They're savage.

For more than a decade at The Birmingham News, unnamed targets have demanded "draw me skinnier," "make my chin smaller," "notice my new hair style!" and, to the editor, "Can't you control your own cartoonist?!" These politicians know the power of a cartoon and, believe me, none of them thought the work zany.

Zany is not what an editorial cartoonist aspires to, yet many in the publishing business increasingly expect it. When The New York Times renames its weekly roundup of editorial cartoons "Laugh lines." When Time Magazine stops running them all together, and when more and more editorial cartoon positions are being cut, the writing is on the wall. In truth, it's hard to blame them. The newspaper industry is in full retreat as readership plummets and the Internet supplants the print medium. In the struggle to reinvent themselves for the brave new world, newspapers are restyling many of the best parts of themselves, or leaving them behind entirely. What offers the best model? Facebook? YouTube? Is sharp commentary passé? Should it be replaced with silly?

And what's next? The Family Guy gets a Pulitzer? The Simpsons? American Dad? The Jib-Jab guys? They are animated, have political content, and are posted online. With the rules shifting and morphing without warning, they may all be eligible some day. So don't be surprised some time if you see Scooby Doo accepting the highest honor in journalism.

Now that would be zany.

— *Scott Stantis*

Scott Stantis is the editorial cartoonist for The Birmingham News. He also draws one cartoon a week for USA Today. His editorial cartoons are syndicated to over 400 newspapers. His comic strip, Prickly City, is distributed to a growing list of nearly 100 newspapers. By writing this column Scott understands that he is obliterating whatever minuscule chance he ever had at winning a Pulitzer Prize. For comments to Scott, email ssstantis@gmail.com.



Artwork by
Scott Stantis

Too Many Cartoonists – Too Little Time

Whenever cartoonists get together, we complain about syndicates (the businesses that sell our cartoons to newspapers). Cartoonists are not businessmen – we want syndicates to be like mothers to us, selflessly nurturing our careers, so we don't have to sully our minds with yucky business thoughts, when we'd rather be thinking about cartoons. But syndicates don't act like mothers, and cartoonists have some very colorful names for the syndicate executives who sell their work – in fact, some of these colorful names include the word "mother."

In addition to being a political cartoonist myself, I run a small syndicate that specializes in editorial cartoons; I see that there must be one thousand aspiring cartoonists for every working professional, as I'm deluged with unsolicited submissions that are truly awful. At times like this, when people are passionate about politics, the inner political cartoonist emerges from the psyche of the talentless "wannabe."

Many wannabe cartoonists recognize that they have no drawing talent, but it seems that everyone thinks they are a writer. I get many submissions from writers who are looking to collaborate with editorial cartoonists. These writers want to send me gags or want to find cartoonists who will draw their gags. Here is a typical gag submission:

"So, we have President Bush standing there, and he says, 'Things are improving in Iraq,' and behind him you see two massive armies, the Shiites and the Sunnis, about to fight each other, and the sky is filled with thousands of U.S. helicopters, then, in the next panel ..."

These are people who think in words, not pictures. For some reason, this group of wannabes includes lots of lawyers who think they are funny. I think lawyers are funny, but I laugh at-them, not with-them; and it is a dark humor that makes me want to go take a shower afterward. These guys just don't get it. The cartoon writers often send obvious or trite gags that they think are brilliant and original. Sometimes the writers follow up with angry mail when they notice that another cartoonist has "stolen" their gag.

The second group of wannabes do their own drawings, but can't see how truly awful their drawings are. These guys like to use computer fonts in their cartoons instead of hand lettering. Often they will use clip art in their cartoons, or lift photographs from the Web, or they will use simple objects like squares and circles, and then have these objects making comments in speech balloons. These wannabes frequently don't know how to work their scanner and will send murky gray images that show crinkled paper backgrounds from the napkins they drew their cartoons on.

One thing aspiring editorial cartoonists have in common is paranoia. I get inquiries like this: "I'm really funny and I have some great ideas, but I need to know how to get them copyrighted first so you won't steal them."

I have a notice on our syndicate website that that says: "We do not accept and will not review unsolicited submissions from cartoonists." Often the submissions come in with a note saying, "I know

you don't accept submissions, but ..."

Ambitious, aspiring cartoonists see syndicates as gatekeepers, guarding a barrier to the success they deserve. Sometimes the passion and perseverance of these wannabes can be frightening. They find my home phone number and my home address. Drive and perseverance in the face of adversity is a virtue, so their quest never ends.

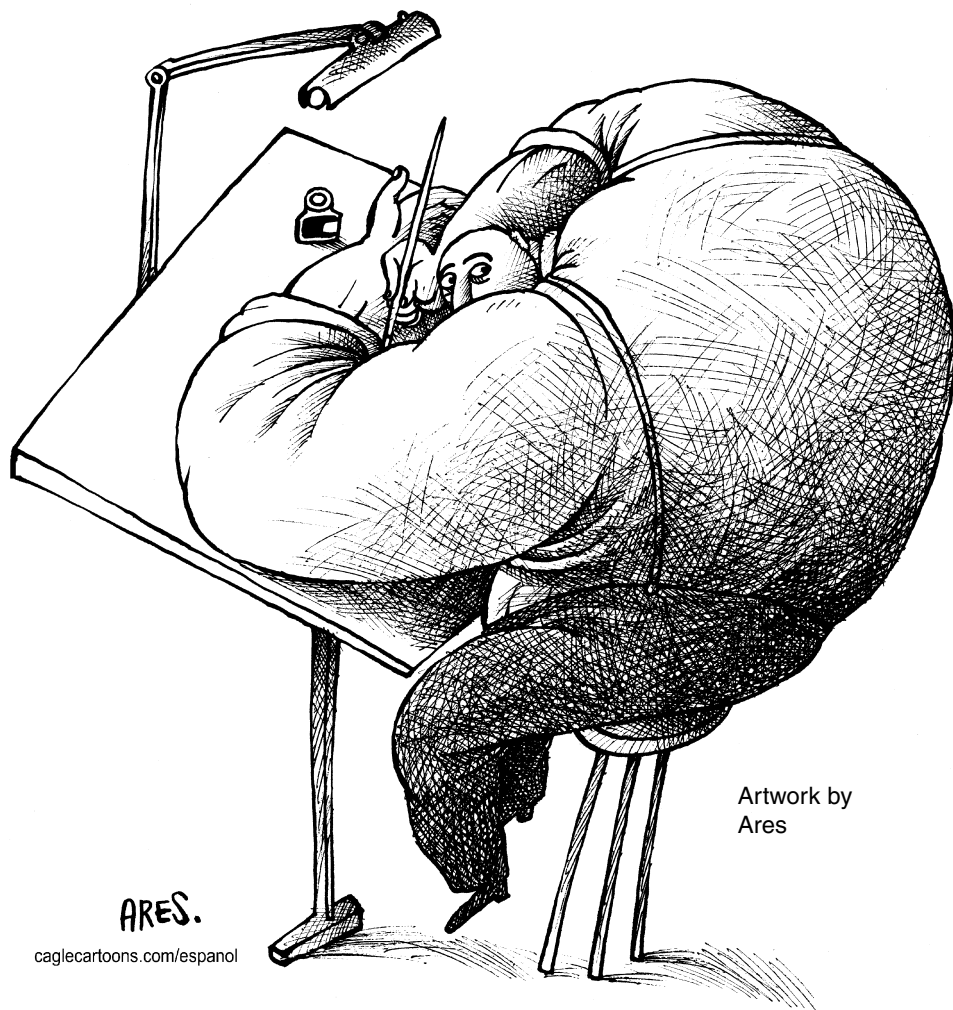
Some horrid amateur cartoonists are convinced that the world of professional cartooning is a closed shop, an old-boy's network where success is a matter of who you know. Wannabes try to be friendly with my employees or cartoonist colleagues, hoping that the relationship will get them past the barrier. Many terrible submissions are forwarded to me by friends.

When I was an aspiring cartoonist, I thought the syndicates were arrogant for sending form-letter responses or for ignoring submissions – but now I understand why they do it. For many wannabes, any response is an invitation to argue. The aspirants are convinced that their work is great and anyone who doesn't "get it" needs educating. Giving a polite brush-off sometimes fuels their anger.

Ironically, editorial cartooning is a terrible business. Newspapers pay only a few dollars a week for packaged groups of talented cartoonists who are, in turn, poorly paid. The professionals compete for fewer and fewer staff cartoonist positions at papers that are cutting back, as the Internet crushes print. More and more professional cartoonists can't make ends meet. The syndicates aren't really a barrier to success for the aspiring cartoonists, just a hurdle on the road to more frustration in a dying profession.

My profession is fading away; I'm poorly paid, and there are thousands of rude, talentless wannabes who want my job ... but Britney Spears shaved her head – at least the life of a professional editorial cartoonist has its little pleasures.

– Daryl Cagle



Artwork by
Ares

ARES.

caglecartoons.com/espanol

Read This About Political Cartoons – Then Write About Something Else

As a political cartoonist, I'd like to think my cartoons influence public opinion, but that rarely happens. People love a cartoon that they already agree with and hate cartoons that they already disagree with. Editors like to choose editorial cartoons that they know their readers will like, so cartoons end up being a reflection of public opinion. In fact, political cartoons offer a great historical tool, giving a true picture of the opinions and emotions of a society at any given time.

Historians seem to have discovered political cartoons only recently, and I've started seeing a steady stream of scholarly papers about my profession as college professors and students suddenly look to my work and the work of my colleagues to support their political positions. One widely held canard seems to be popular among the academics: That the world supported the USA after 9/11, and this support was then squandered by the Bush administration's adventures in the Middle East.

Academics like to look at the cartoons drawn immediately after the 9/11 attacks where, around the world, almost every editorial cartoonist drew the same image of a weeping Statue of Liberty. I drew one, too. In fact, most cartoonists are ashamed of their weeping statues; we wish we could have a "do-over" where we wouldn't draw the first image to come to mind. Newspaper columnists

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all wrote much the same column right after 9/11, but it is easier to notice matching cartoons than matching columns, so cartoonists get the bad rap for “group-think.” Even so, our matching cartoons were what the public wanted to see at that time, and I probably received more mail from readers who loved my weeping Liberty more than any other cartoon I’ve drawn.

International political cartoonists revile the USA in a uniform drumbeat of daily digs at America. The academics don’t notice that international political cartoons before 9/11 were almost as negative about America as the cartoons are now. After our matching, weeping statues, the American and international cartoonists diverged again. On 9/12, American cartoonists started drawing patriotic cartoons portraying resolve, strength, and the virtues of the New York Fire and Police Departments, standing tall as twin towers. American cartoonists drew scores of images of a strong Uncle Sam, threatening eagles, and a newly militant Statue of Liberty, demanding revenge.

Just after 9/11 the international cartoonists depicted the irony of mighty America put in its place. A favorite, foreign symbol for America is Superman, and we saw scores of images showing both Superman and Uncle Sam defeated, injured, bleeding, and grieving. The worldwide cartoonists treated 9/11 in the way that tabloids treat fallen celebrities: with delight in the spectacle of a beautiful actress who is overweight or getting a messy divorce – or better yet, caught in a drunken scene, screaming racial epithets so that we can see that the rich, powerful, famous, conceited, fallen star was a hypocrite all along.

Some international cartoonists wrote to me about the patriotic cartoons; they couldn’t believe American cartoonists would choose to draw such cartoons by their own free will; we must have been directed to draw that nonsense by the Bush Administration. Academics have picked up on the idea of “self-censorship;” that cartoonists somehow didn’t draw what they wanted to draw because the country wasn’t ready for jokes, or editors didn’t want to see criticism of the Bush administration at a time when we all had to pull together.

In fact, the system worked as it always had: Some cartoonists criticized the government right away, some cartoonists were joking immediately, most cartoonists held the same opinions as their readers, editors selected cartoons they agreed with and thought their readers would agree with. Newspapers ended up printing cartoons that accurately reflected public opinion, both here and abroad.

I have a few words for the professors and college students:

1. *Editorial cartoons show that the rest of the world didn’t like America before 9/11; they didn’t like us just after 9/11; and they still don’t like us.*
2. *The government doesn’t control or intimidate American cartoonists or editors, now or then. Yes, we really believe what we say in our cartoons. No, cartoonists are not hampered by self-censorship.*
3. *Please don’t ask me to comment on your paper, thesis, or dissertation about editorial cartoons. Just read this book; then write about something else.*

– Daryl Cagle

Artwork, opposite page, by Alen Lauzan Falcon, Chile