Critic or cheerleader?

Editorial cartoons during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic

By Jody C Baumgartner and Hanna Kassab

Abstract
An examination of editorial cartoons about the Coronavirus pandemic during the first 6 months finds that subjects and topics followed developments in the spread of the pandemic and public health and safety responses and mirrored those found in news coverage. More, messages generally reflected largely consensual establishment views of the crisis and official health and safety responses. Cartoonists seemed to adopt the role of cheerleader for government policy and efforts to grapple with the pandemic.

Keywords
editorial cartoons, coronavirus, pandemic

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Editorial cartoons have long been accorded a special place in the hearts and minds of the politically interested. For example, many accept as a matter of faith the idea that in the 19th century, the downfall of Boss Tweed and the Tammany Ring was at least partially the result of relentless attacks in the form of editorial cartoons by Thomas Nast (DiFabio, 2013). More generally, many scholars and observers attribute to editorial cartoons the ability to affect social and political change, in some cases, even to “undermine political legitimacy” (Danjoux, 2007, p. 246). In this sense, it is believed that editorial cartoons, like satire, speak “truth to power.”

However, there have been historical exceptions to this broad characterization. In particular, during times of national crisis many editorial cartoonists seem to be supportive of government and the establishment (loosely defined), acting more like cheerleaders than critics (Caswell, 2004). This was apparent, for example, during both world wars and to some extent the Great Depression (Baumgartner, 2019a, 2019b; Solomon, 1984; Somers, 1996). Similarly, cartoons about 9/11 produced in the United States were, and largely continue to be, fairly one-sided in terms of their pro-American messages (Hoffman & Howard, 2007).

In this analysis, the authors look at 1,420 editorial cartoons produced by artists in a well-known syndication service about the Coronavirus pandemic during the first 6 months of the crisis. Their descriptive initial analysis first examines patterns of coverage, quantitatively tracking the number of pandemic-related cartoons produced and the subjects and topics focused on in these cartoons. This preliminary exploration shows that, consistent with news values theory, the subjects of these cartoons followed both on-the-ground developments and news coverage.

In a secondary analysis, the authors explore whether the cartoonists who produced these cartoons were acting as critic or cheerleader for government or establishment efforts to battle the pandemic. Here, they find that messages in this smaller sample of the most popular cartoons of the period were generally consistent with or supportive of the largely consensual establishment views of the crisis and official health and safety responses. This finding is anticipated by Bennett’s (1990) indexing theory, which suggests that the range of views found in the news media is to some extent a function of how divided government itself is.

The research adds to a relatively small body of research on editorial cartoons. It also highlights the idea that while cartoonists may “stand on the front lines of free speech” (The Association of American Editorial Cartoonists, 2020), their work is both guided and bound by the zeitgeist, or spirit of the times (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2008). Like satire, editorial cartoons are to some extent culture-bound, displaying varying degrees of edginess based on the subject matter, the political climate of the period and editorial preferences.

The next section is devoted to a review of the literature on editorial cartoons, including a brief discussion of the authors’ expectations. Following this, they discuss the methods employed in their analysis and then turn to their results. The final section discusses these results, the limitations of the study and its implications.

Literature Review

Given the special place that many accord editorial cartoons in the United States, it is somewhat surprising that there is little scholarship devoted to the subject, at least
relative to other forms of political discourse (e.g., debates, campaign advertisements). The extant research on the subject comes from diverse academic traditions, including history, political science, communication, studies of the arts and more.

There are several book-length studies that take a comprehensive approach to the subject, examining the craft of political cartooning, the history and development of the genre, American political cartoons throughout history, as well as examples, perspectives and insights into the place of editorial cartooning in society (e.g., Hess & Northrop, 2017; Lordon, 2006). Some few books are more specific in their focus. For example, the images, metaphors and narratives of political cartoons were Edwards’s (1997) focus in her book-length treatment of the 1988 U.S. presidential campaign.

Most research on editorial cartoons highlights the idea that cartoonists use oversimplified representations of reality, often in conjunction with well-known symbols, in telling their “stories.” For example, Nilsen and Nilsen’s (2008) analysis focused on the idea that cartoonists frequently use well-known symbols as cognitive shortcuts to help tell their stories, given the short amount of time they have readers’ attention. This is consistent with research on televised political satire, which shows that satirists present oversimplified caricatures of the figures they are targeting (Lichter et al., 2014).

Virtually all research on editorial cartoons is concerned with explicating what subjects cartoonists were drawing, how those subjects were represented or what types of “stories” were being told by cartoonists. In other words, most of the research is descriptive, largely atheoretical, focused on interpretation of the cartoons examined.

Most studies focus on cartoons about higher profile societal or political events. For example, a number of article-length studies examine political cartoons during U.S. presidential election cycles. These descriptive analyses include studies focused on the elections of 1976 (Bormann et al., 1978; Hill, 1984), 1980 (Desousa & Medhurst, 1982), 1992 (Koetzle & Brunell, 1996), 1996 (Sewell, 1998), 2000 (Edwards, 2001), 2004 (Conners, 2005, 2007), 2008 (Edwards, 2009) and 2012 (Conners, 2013), as well as the 1988 presidential nominations (Buell & Maus, 1988). Most focus on how candidates were represented in cartoons throughout the campaign. Two of them, however, examining the 2008 Democratic nomination contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, were more narrowly focused on the issue of how race and gender were represented in cartoons (Conners, 2010; Zurbriggen & Sherman, 2010). This focus on elections extends beyond the U.S. setting. One study, for example, focused on how Canadian voters were represented in cartoons in Canadian newspapers during the 2004, 2006 and 2008 federal elections (Trimble et al., 2010), while another centered around the 2013 general election in Pakistan (Shaikh et al., 2016).

Other lines of inquiry center around cartoons produced about high-profile events or national crises. For example, Solomon (1984) reviewed the depiction of the Great Depression in New Yorker cartoons. In his analysis, Somers (1996) focused on cartoons drawn and published during World War II (WWII), showing that hostile racial stereotypes dominated depictions of the Axis powers. Diamond’s (2002) analysis aimed at uncovering “themes and motifs” present in cartoons produced in the Muslim and Arab world about 9/11 in its immediate aftermath. Another analysis focused on 9/11 cartoons showed that while some editorial cartoons are edgy and hard-hitting, others seem geared toward simply being funny (Hoffman & Howard, 2007). Bounegru and Forceville’s (2011) study of cartoons about the 2008 global financial crisis is another example of research on editorial cartoons focused on high-profile events.
As might be expected, the methodology employed by researchers of editorial cartoons varies. For example, some scholars conduct extremely small studies, focusing on relatively few cartoons (e.g., Hasanah & Hidayat, 2020; Ramli & Mokhtar, 2019; Ulubeyli et al., 2015). A plurality of the research can be characterized as larger studies, examining from several hundred to over 1,000 cartoons (Conners, 2005, 2010, 2013; Edwards, 2001; Koetzle & Brunell, 1996; Sewell, 1998; Shaikh et al., 2016). Many analyses have used cartoons drawn from specific newspapers (e.g., Edwards, 2001; Koetzle & Brunell, 1996; Zurbriggen & Sherman, 2010), but several U.S.-based studies (Conners, 2005, 2010, 2013; Edwards, 2001) have drawn samples of cartoons from Cagle Cartoons (http://CagleCartoons.com), a syndication service that “distributes the work of about sixty of the top cartoonists from around the world [and to which] almost half of America’s approximately 1,400 daily, paid-circulation newspapers subscribe” (Cagle, 2020).

Another difference in methodology is the process by which analysts interpret cartoons. At one end of the spectrum are studies that make little if any mention of a formal interpretive strategy. These analyses, in other words, simply discuss various cartoons and their meanings in what may be thought of as a simple qualitative approach (e.g., Edwards, 2007; Hill, 1984). Other researchers employ a formal semiotic approach (Akande, 2002; Hasanah & Hidayat, 2020; Mendoza, 2016; Ramli & Mokhtar, 2019; Ulubeyli et al., 2015).

Most of the larger analyses formally specify and code for various concepts, dimensions and so on to categorize the cartoons, in what amounts to content analyses. For example, Koetzle and Brunell (1996) searched for and recorded topics present and various candidate traits depicted in cartoons during the 1992 presidential campaign, as well as whether the cartoon was a positive or negative evaluation of the candidate. In her analysis, Edwards (2001) identified five themes present in the cartoons in her sample. Conners (2010) was looking specifically for various representations of race and gender in her analysis.

Some research on this subject highlights the idea that the cartoons that make it into the editorial pages of newspapers display varying degrees of edginess, often based on the subject matter, the political climate of the period and editorial preferences. In fact, an examination of many editorial cartoons during periods of national crises suggests that during these periods many editorial cartoonists adopt a pro-government stance in their work, acting as cheerleaders for government policy and action. This was noticeable during WWI (World War I), WWII and the Great Depression (Baumgartner, 2019a, 2019b; Somers, 1996). It was also evident to some extent in recent cartoons about North Korea (Winfield & Yoon, 2002). Another analysis found that cartoons published in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 were not terribly critical of the United States and George W. Bush and his administration (Hoffman & Howard, 2007; see also Lamb, 2007). So while there are exceptions to this rule, some evidence suggests that editorial cartoons drawn during wartime and other national crises are not terribly critical of government (Caswell, 2004).

Thus, while it might be unfair to suggest that editorial cartoons drawn during national crises are propaganda, neither are they, as a rule, terribly critical of government. This is important to note because cartoonists, as a rule, are similar to satirists in that they generally target government and other institutions in their work. The point here is that editorial cartoonists, like political observ, commentators and others,
practice their craft in a particular social and political environment. This means that they are to some degree constrained, or limited in what they say, by what is acceptable according to newspaper editors, opinion leaders and the public. One ought not, in other words, necessarily to expect to see the full range of public opinion expressed in editorial cartoons at all times.

The first part of this analysis, a content analysis, is guided by news value theory. Much of the descriptive scholarship on editorial cartoons is consistent with this theory, in large part because high-profile events, happenings or crises seem to be the focus of most research on editorial cartooning. In its simplest form, news values theory suggests that there are factors external to the process of news production and dissemination that make it more likely for certain types of stories to be featured as “news.” In particular, the theory suggests that there are aspects or characteristics of events, or stories, that make it more likely they will be featured as “news” by news organizations. Collectively, these aspects are news values, or the values that make a story newsworthy in the eyes of news organizations.

Although the foundation for news values theory had been laid much earlier (see, for example, Lippmann, 1922, p. 223), it was formally introduced in Galtung and Ruge’s seminal 1965 study. Since then, different scholars have revised, expanded and otherwise massaged the theory (e.g., Brighton & Foy, 2007; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001; see summary in Caple & Bednarek, 2013), but the core set of news values identified by various scholars varies little. In fact, “key news values such as timeliness, proximity, prominence, unusualness, conflict, human interest, and impact have been fundamentally stable since the early 1900s” (Parks, 2019, p. 784). Scholars largely use this theory to examine what types of stories appear in various news outlets. For example, in his classic study, Gans (2004) examined stories in CBS and NBC news broadcasts as well as Newsweek and TIME.

Consistent with news value theory, the authors expect the number, topics and subjects of the body of the pandemic-related cartoons in their sample to reflect both on-the-ground developments in this public health crisis and news coverage during the same period of time. This is their first hypothesis.

The second analysis, in which the authors conduct a cursory examination of the message of these cartoons, is guided by news indexing theory. As originally formulated by Bennett, news indexing theory suggests that “mass media professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to ‘index’ the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic” (Bennett, 1990, p. 106). The theory specifies that news follows mainstream, not extremist or marginal, voices and viewpoints in government debate, an important distinction to make. Research has shown that there is some merit to this theory (Althaus et al., 1996; Mermin, 1996; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). The authors’ expectation is that the message of the overwhelming majority of cartoons will reflect consensus or establishment views of the crisis and measures taken to combat it. This is their second hypothesis.

Data and Method

The present study is situated in the category of descriptive, interpretive content analyses of editorial cartoons focused on high-profile events, in this case, the
Coronavirus pandemic. The initial focus is on the number of pandemic-related editorial cartoons produced during the early months of the crisis and what subjects were depicted in these cartoons. News values theory suggests that there will be some congruence in the number of cartoons produced and their focus with developments on the ground and what news organizations were discussing.

Following this, the authors examine how these subjects were presented. This secondary analysis focuses on whether editorial cartoonists seemed to be critical or supportive of establishment views surrounding pandemic-related issues. In line with research that examines cartoons during times of national crises as well as indexing theory, the expectation is that the majority of cartoons the authors examine will be supportive, rather than critical, of establishment views, government policies and messaging regarding the pandemic.

Like several others who have researched editorial cartoons, the authors drew cartoons from Cagle.com, a syndication service with over 1,000 clients. Cagle represents more than 60 cartoonists from around the world, including four who have won Pulitzer Prizes for editorial cartooning (Adam Zyglis, Buffalo News; Mike Keefe, Denver Post; Steve Sack, Minneapolis Star Tribune; and Kevin Siers, Charlotte Observer). Although the site makes it convenient to draw a large sample of cartoons, it is worth noting that Cagle serves newspapers that are unwilling or unable to employ cartoonists. These tend to be smaller newspapers that may be less likely to publish content that is edgier. To say this differently, there may be a somewhat conservative (in the general, not political sense) bias to the cartoons found on Cagle’s website. This limitation will necessarily temper the interpretation of data in the authors’ secondary analysis.

The Cagle website allows users to browse cartoon collections by artist, date or topic. The authors selected cartoons from two of the numerous topics available from January through June of 2020: “Coronavirus” (https://www.cagle.com/news/coronavirus/) and “Covid-19” (https://www.cagle.com/news/covid-19/). Several other topic categories had Coronavirus cartoons as well, including “Open America,” “Corona Economy,” “School Cancelled,” “Corona Vaccine,” “Stay at Home,” “Toilet Paper,” “Social Distancing,” “Dr. Fauci,” “Hand Sanitizer,” and “Quarantine.” However, a thorough review of cartoons in these categories revealed that the majority were also included in the “Coronavirus” and “Covid-19” categories. In addition, the subjects and tone of the cartoons in these narrower topic areas differed little from those in the larger “Coronavirus” and “Covid-19” categories. Because of this, and because drawing all of the cartoons from the two main categories dealing with the pandemic yielded a relatively large $n$, the decision was made to ignore cartoons in these smaller and more specific categories.

All cartoons that appeared in these two categories from January 21, 2020 (the first day either category had a cartoon) through June 30, 2020, were downloaded. The authors’ sample, in other words, is not a sample in the traditional sense, but rather represents the universe of cartoons from these categories. Of these cartoons, 470 were duplicates, appearing in both topic areas, leaving them with a total of 1,859 unique cartoons.

There were only 6 days during this period in which a Coronavirus-related cartoon did not appear, all of which were in the first month of the crisis. Relatively few cartoons were published during the first 7 weeks. The week of March 9 to 15 saw a steep increase in the number of cartoons produced from the previous week (43 to 101). The
number of Coronavirus-related cartoons produced peaked during the 3-week period covering the last 2 weeks of March and the first week of April: 129 during the week of March 16 to 22, 117 from March 23 to 29 and 130 in the week of March 30 to April 5. The numbers of cartoons produced during the following three weeks hovered around 100 (100, 97, 106). Figure 1 shows the distribution of the number of Coronavirus-related cartoons per week throughout the reporting period.

The authors also counted the total number of cartoons found on the Cagle website on the first and third Mondays of each month, from February through June, for a total of 10 data points. The authors used these data to calculate the percentage of Coronavirus-related cartoons of the total number of cartoons produced throughout this period. These percentages are displayed in Figure 2. What is evident is that the percentage of cartoons devoted to the Coronavirus during this period mirrored that of the total number of pandemic-related cartoons produced during this time period.

As is the case with most political cartoons, the focus of most cartoons in the authors’ sample was fairly easy to discern, at least at the general level. The only difficulty was attempting to collapse these subjects and topics into a manageable number of meaningful categories. To begin, the primary author reviewed the entire corpus of cartoons, constructing a preliminary set of broad-based and general categories designed to capture the subject or target of each cartoon. Both researchers then used this preliminary scheme to code each cartoon. This initial phase resulted in approximately two thirds of the cartoons being coded in agreement. At this point, the primary author went through both the codebook and data set a second time, not restricting attention to discrepancies, refining categories and the decision rules used to code for each.
General virus cartoons were those that were focused on the virus, its spread, deadly nature, potential second wave, general effects on society and so on. These cartoons were also distinguished by their lack of a more obvious specific target or topic. A smaller category of general cartoons about the virus were those that contained positive or uplifting messages. One example would be a positive and hopeful “we’re all in this together” message that envisioned an eventual end to the crisis. Cartoons portraying health care workers or other “essential” workers as heroes were also included in this uplifting message category.

The next category focused on President Donald Trump. Cartoons in this category included all that featured the president—his image, the word “Trump,” the first family, Mike Pence, or anything else that made it obvious it was about Trump. This was the case even when there was a secondary focus (e.g., the economy) of the cartoon.

Three other categories were also focused on political issues or topics. The first included cartoons that were about the 2020 election, including the Democratic presidential nomination season, the general election and various issues surrounding voting (e.g., voting rights, mail-in ballots). Another political category included cartoons focusing on governance, including the federal government, various national politicians, the major political parties and the World Health Organization. Finally, some few cartoons targeted the media, broadly defined as newspapers, television news, social media and more.

Other cartoons focused on the economy. Here, subtopics varied widely and included downturns in the economy or the stock market, personal stock or retirement portfolios, lower oil or gas prices (or oil and gas surpluses), the federal government’s stimulus bill or stimulus checks, unemployment, small businesses suffering or big business benefiting from the pandemic and shutdowns and general questions about capitalism as opposed to socialism. Somewhat relatedly, other cartoons focused on re-opening
business, schools and so on. These began to appear as the spring progressed, with the overwhelming majority opposed to the idea of opening “too early.”

Another category dealt with the general disruption of daily life. These focused on various inconveniences brought on by the pandemic, for example, not being able to dine out at restaurants or get one’s hair cut or styled. More specific topics related to the disruption of daily life included cartoons focused on the fact that families or individuals were quarantined at home for extended periods of time, the disruption of holidays (e.g., Mother’s Day, Easter, graduation), Zoom and online life, shortages or hoarding of various items (e.g., toilet paper, face masks) and the fact that sports and sporting events were canceled.

Other cartoons dealt with health and safety issues. The category of health care included all cartoons referencing the health care system, nursing homes, the search for a vaccine, testing and other general health care issues. Similar categories were devoted to cartoons about social distancing and masks. A final general safety measures category included cartoons about other safety measures (e.g., washing hands, not touching one’s face) and cartoons that referenced more than one individual safety measure (e.g., masks and social distancing).

A decision rule similar to the one guiding the coding of Trump cartoons was used for cartoons referencing China, Chinese leadership and so forth. If any reference to China was included, regardless of other issues or topics that may have been present, we coded it as China. Virtually all of these cartoons were produced in the beginning weeks of the collection period and identified China, either directly or indirectly, as having been the source of the virus. As the spring wore on, there were fewer of these cartoons.

Another, rather minor category, focused on negative public response to the pandemic, including panic, the spread or belief of misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories about the pandemic. This category does not include more prosaic negative public responses like general frustration. Finally, some cartoons had a dual focus, in which the virus shared the spotlight with another issue (e.g., climate change), while others were clearly produced for either foreign or state-specific audiences.

After finalizing revisions to the codebook, both investigators coded each cartoon again. In this round of coding, there was agreement on 1,592 of the 1,859 cartoons in their data set, for intercoder agreement of 85.6% (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .914$). After examining frequencies for matches and mismatches by category and determining that there were no systematic differences between them, the authors deleted all cases where they disagreed. They then excluded the 59 cartoons that had a dual focus (Coronavirus and another issue) and the 113 that were geared toward state, local or foreign audiences. This resulted in a total $n$ of 1,420 cartoons.

**Pandemic-Related Editorial Cartoons**

Table 1 lists the percentage of cartoons, by category, of the authors’ sample. A plurality of the cartoons, a full 38.7%, targeted President Trump. This is hardly surprising. Presidents rank high on numerous news values. Moreover, studies have shown that most of the jokes told by hosts on late night television lampoon presidents (Lichter et al., 2014) and that Trump has been targeted on these shows more than any other president for which data are available (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2019). The overwhelming
majority of the cartoons directed against Trump were critical. The relatively few that were not critical focused on the dilemmas he faced, for example, the fact that the pandemic was causing economic disruption which in turn threatened his chances for reelection. In addition to cartoons about Trump, an additional 3.9% were about politics: 1.6% about the 2020 election; 2.3% about government, other political institutions and politicians and 0.9% about the media.

The second-largest category (10.7% of the sample) contained cartoons that were focused generally on the Coronavirus. This is clearly consistent with news values theory, inasmuch as the Coronavirus pandemic was a biggest public health crisis since the 1918 Spanish Flu. By their very nature, these cartoons were more negative or pessimistic than not. Another 3.6% of the cartoons, also generally about the virus, were more positive, either contained uplifting messages or focused on pandemic “heroes.”

Several categories of cartoons contained messages about the effect the pandemic was having on daily life. Here it is plain to see congruence between on-the-ground developments, cartoon topics and news values such as timeliness, proximity,
prominence, unusualness, human interest and impact. Collectively, these cartoons were 14.6% of the sample. They included cartoons focused on people quarantining at home (6.1%), how the pandemic affected holidays (4.2%), shortages or hoarding of various products (1.7%) and the disruption of sports and sporting events (1.2%). In addition, there were some few cartoons about Zoom or online life (0.8%) and other pandemic-induced inconveniences (0.6%).

Cartoons about health and safety issues made up 10.1% of the authors’ data set. They included those about masks (3.5%), social distancing (2.5%) and other individual safety measures (e.g., washing hands) or ones referencing two or more safety measures (2.3%). A final 1.8% were about the U.S. health care system. Most of these were focused on the development of a vaccine or on how the pandemic was affecting nursing homes.

A full 11.4% of the cartoons in the sample dealt with general economic issues. Of these, 7% were focused on topics like the economic downturn, Wall Street, the declining value of stock portfolios, lower gas and oil prices resulting from decreased demand (or increased supply), federal government stimulus checks, small businesses suffering, corporations benefitting and more. Another 4.4% were focused on reopening. Of course, strictly speaking this topic was not exclusively about economic matters, but many of these cartoons were specifically focused on the subject of re-opening businesses.

The final two categories include cartoons about China (4.2%) and those that focused on various negative public responses and beliefs (1.8%), such as conspiracy theories, “fake news,” and denial of the pandemic.

In short, the production of editorial cartoons about pandemic-related issues during the first 6 months of 2020 and the subjects and topics of those cartoons reflected both on-the-ground developments in the crisis and more generally what people were thinking and talking about. This finding, it could be argued, is intuitive and is consistent with news values theory.

Table 1 also presents Pearson correlation coefficients between the percentage of Coronavirus-related cartoons in each category and the total percentage of Coronavirus-related cartoons by month. Monthly percentages of more than half of the categories track fairly closely with the total monthly distribution of Coronavirus-related cartoons. More specifically, some fairly predictable patterns are evident. For example, there is an extremely high and significant correlation between the percentage of cartoons produced each month and those focused on Trump, the virus itself, and those related to economic matters. This was to be expected, as these subjects are fairly easily predicted by news values theory and were the most frequently produced. Other significant correlations include the total percentage of cartoons produced each month and those related to the election of 2020, those with uplifting or positive messages and those focused on negative public responses or beliefs. In addition, the percentage of cartoons each month in five of the 10 topics in the general safety and health care and general disruption of daily life categories were significantly correlated with the percentage of cartoons produced each month.

On the contrary, the monthly percentage of cartoons about China and re-opening were not significantly correlated with the total percentage of cartoons each month. This too was not surprising. Approximately two thirds of the cartoons about China (66.6%) were produced in the opening 2 months of the reporting period and cartoons about re-opening were completely absent during the first 3 months.
Beyond basic patterns of coverage, the authors were also interested in how editorial cartoon content compared with content found in news coverage of the pandemic during this period of time. Therefore, they needed data that measured what news organizations were covering. For this, they employed the online GDELT Project’s Television Comparer, which uses data from the Internet Archive’s Television News Archive to analyze television news coverage from over 150 stations over the past 9 years (GDELT 2.0 Television API Debuts!, 2017).

To start, they entered search terms that roughly corresponded to their cartoon categories (e.g., “economy,” “reopening”), tracking how often the terms were found in news coverage on the three main cable network channels (CNN, Fox News and MSNBC). Data were downloaded and daily scores for each search term were totaled by month. This gave the authors the ability to compare the relative amount of news devoted to each topic with the percentage of cartoons produced about each topic by month.

The authors then ran bivariate correlations between the monthly percentage of cartoons produced by category and the monthly GDELT cable news channel scores by search term. The results, presented in Table 2, show there was a high and significant correlation between what cable news stations and editorial cartoonists were focused on during this period in seven of the eight categories selected for analysis. There was no significant correlation between news coverage and cartoons about shortages, but topics covered in editorial cartoons generally mirrored those found in news coverage. Taken together with patterns of production and coverage in editorial cartoons during this period, this finding supports a news value approach to understanding editorial cartoons during this period.

The initial analysis painted a quantitative picture of general patterns of coverage of pandemic-related cartoons produced from January through June of 2020. However, this analysis is somewhat limited in that the authors only categorized cartoons by topic. Therefore, they conducted a secondary analysis.

The authors examined each of the cartoons included in a new “Top Ten Cartoons of the Week” feature on Cagle’s website, which began the week of March 21, 2020.

| Cartoon Category & “News Search Term”                      | Pearson’s R |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| General (virus) & “Coronavirus”                           | .970**      |
| General (virus) & “China”                                 | .842*       |
| Economy & “Economy”                                       | .851*       |
| Re-opening & “Re-opening”                                 | .997**      |
| Health care & “Covid”                                     | .900*       |
| Masks & “Masks”                                           | .858*       |
| General disruption daily life & “Quarantine”              | .870*       |
| Shortages & “Shortages”                                   | .677        |

*p < .05. **p < .01.
Cartoons here were those that were the most popular with (i.e., purchased by) newspaper editors. This secondary analysis thus differs from the previous in that it focuses on the demand side of the equation (what newspapers published) rather than the supply side (what cartoonists drew). This sample, in other words, consists of cartoons that editors wanted to publish rather than those that cartoonists wanted to draw. The analysis examined cartoons from the 15 weeks through July 4, 2020. In all, 164 cartoons were included (there were 15 cartoons in each of the first 2 weeks the website ran the “Top Ten” feature, and some weeks had more than 10 cartoons because of ties).

The authors first categorized these cartoons according to the main topic of each. Here they found, unsurprisingly, that a full 68.9% (108) of the cartoons focused on some aspect of the Coronavirus. Another three cartoons (1.8%) featured a shared focus on the pandemic and some aspect of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. This finding is again consistent with news value theory. Thus, a total of 70.7% (111) of the cartoons were virus-related. Other main topics included 13 cartoons (7.9%) related to BLM (in addition to those mentioned above), 11 (6.7%) focused on the 2020 presidential election and 29 (17.7%) that had some other focus (e.g., Dave Grandlund’s May 16 cartoon focused on the death of rock legend Little Richard).

The authors then looked at the message of the cartoon. What was the artist trying to say? In particular, they were looking to see whether the message of the cartoon was generally consistent with what might be considered official or establishment views or policies of the virus, its spread, health and safety measures and so forth. Indexing theory anticipates that because the pandemic was an international public health crisis, the message of the majority of the cartoons would be consistent with, or supportive of, largely consensual establishment views.

To be clear, these views or policies did not necessarily equate to the official views of President Trump. As anyone who lived through the crisis knows, establishment views and policies sometimes seemed at odds with what Trump was saying. In fact, it is not unreasonable to categorize many of Trump’s views throughout the crisis as extremist or marginal, or exactly those views that indexing theory suggests will not be represented. More, to suggest that there was an “establishment” view is not to imply that such a view was monolithic. Again, as those who lived through this public health crisis know, there was a very vocal minority opposing establishment views and policies (that all should wear masks, social distance, etc.).

To determine whether a cartoon’s message was consistent with the establishment view was not terribly difficult. The authors simply relied on their own sense of what the dominant messages were in the mainstream media throughout this time period.

Of the 164 cartoons examined, a full 79.3% (130) contained what most would consider to be messages that represented or mirrored establishment views, espousing the importance of wearing masks, social distancing and so forth. Another 23 cartoons (14%) had messages that were fairly neutral. By this, the authors mean they were neither critical nor supportive of (consistent with) establishment views.

Only 11 cartoons (6.7%) in this smaller sample had views that could be considered critical. Three of these were pandemic-related, four were related to the BLM movement and associated issues and one featured a shared focus on both of these topics. One cartoon was focused on the presidential election and two were on topics the authors categorized as “other.”

However, it should be noted that the authors used a fairly generous definition of “critical.” Put simply, none of these cartoons had a message that was completely
opposed to establishment views. This may be related to the potential conservative bias of Cagle cartoons referred to previously. For example, the three cartoons focused on the pandemic suggested:

- Social distancing might have had some negative effects, inasmuch as it was keeping us all apart (March 21, #13);
- Some remote learning students were suffering more than others (May 2, #3);
- Some families had adverse reactions to constantly being home together (May 2, #4).

Although not the focus of the analysis, it is worth noting that of the critical cartoons focused on various aspects of BLM, one took aim at people engaged in looting during the riots (June 6, #5), two implied that defunding the police might not be good public policy (June 13, #4 and #5) and one came to the defense of police. In terms of critical viewpoints, this latter cartoon may have been the boldest of all of those examined.

In fact, although the authors did not record the messages of cartoons in the larger sample, both researchers came to the same conclusion. Consistent with indexing theory, very few cartoons in the larger sample were critical of establishment views or policies.

Discussion

It should come as little surprise that editorial cartoonists spilled a considerable amount of ink drawing cartoons about the Coronavirus in 2020. In this essay, the authors examined a sample of these cartoons. The first thing notable is that, reminiscent of a point made by Nilsen and Nilsen (2008), the cartoons in the sample largely reflected the zeitgeist of the first half of 2020. During the first 6 months of 2020, national discourse was dominated by the Coronavirus pandemic. This was true in interpersonal communication and in virtually all communication media. News value theory suggests that an event of this magnitude, impact and so on would be prominently featured in daily news coverage. The authors expected to see similar “coverage” of pandemic-related matters in editorial cartoons.

This was the case. As seen in Figure 1, the cartoons in the sample seemed to follow events “on the ground” and national discourse as well. Virus-related cartoons appeared sporadically throughout the first month of the authors’ collection period, reflecting news coverage of the virus during those early weeks. By late February, the number of cartoons began to spike, peaking in late March and early April. Numbers began to decline through the late spring, and by early summer had begun to level out. However, Figure 1 illustrates that even here the lower number of cartoons that were produced in the late spring and early summer was roughly double that of the number produced during the early period. The virus was still a major component of national discourse and the work of editorial cartoonists reflected that reality. In a smaller systematic sample of all cartoons produced for Cagle during their collection period, the authors found that pandemic-related cartoons accounted for an average of 56.6% of the total number of cartoons produced.

Even more to this point, the subjects and targets of the cartoons in their sample were quite similar to what news values theory might predict. As a story (or series of
stories), the pandemic and its effects on society was at once timely, proximate to people, prominent, unusual, had an enormous impact on both society and individuals and obviously lent itself to a human-interest approach. The authors found that the production and topics of editorial cartoons were consistent with both what news value theory would predict and what could be found in news coverage about the virus. Predictably, a plurality of the pandemic-related cartoons produced focused on President Trump. Perhaps equally predictably, virtually all were negative. There were also numerous cartoons about the effects the pandemic was having on various aspects of the economy, the importance of general safety measures, the disruption of everyday life, reopening the economy, and early on, China.

The secondary analysis focused on the messages of pandemic-related cartoons. A sample of the most popular cartoons during this period revealed that the message of the majority of these was consistent with establishment views of the pandemic and the public health response to it. This finding is in line with indexing theory and previous research on editorial cartoons produced during times of national crisis. Although there were exceptions, particularly early on, many editorial cartoons produced during WWI, the Great Depression and WWII had a distinct pro-government bias (Baumgartner, 2019a, 2019b; Solomon, 1984; Somers, 1996), as did those that appeared in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (Hoffman & Howard, 2007). One obvious example of this was the pro-government propaganda produced prior to and during WWII by Theodore Geisel (Dr. Suess). Although editorial cartoonists are perhaps best known for being critics of various government officials and policies, during the first 6 months of 2020 they functioned more as cheerleaders.

In fact, collectively, the messages of cartoons in this sample were largely one-sided. Put differently, there were numerous ideas, issues, policy alternatives and so on that were not represented in these cartoons. For example, not a single cartoon in the authors’ sample contained a pro-Trump message. The overwhelming majority of the 550 cartoons featuring the president were anti-Trump, with the remaining few being generously, neutral. Perhaps this was a fair representation of the president’s statements, policies and so on. However, the complete absence of any messages that were supportive of a president for whom roughly half of the American electorate voted for was noticeable.

As another example, there were some cartoons toward the beginning of the pandemic period that identified China as the source of the virus, implicitly laying the blame at their feet. But by early spring, a narrative had emerged that it was “racist” to identify the virus with China. From this point forward, very few cartoons in this sample did so. There were also few cartoons that presented the idea that a blanket policy of almost total shutdown involved numerous tradeoffs. These included public health risks of increased drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, divorce and depression associated with extended periods of home quarantine. Few cartoons seemed to advocate alternative or nuanced public health policy approaches, like taking stronger measures to make sure at-risk populations were safe and allowing for more latitude for those who were less at risk. Similarly, relatively few cartoons advocated earlier reopening of businesses, in spite of the fact that this policy was favored by many people.

Pandemic-related cartoons during the first 6 months of the crisis were in one sense helping to reinforce existing messages in what is referred to by social scientists as an
echo-chamber (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Far from being a voice of dissent or “speaking truth to power,” they generally echoed the dominant narrative present in news coverage and elsewhere. This makes it more likely that these cartoons aided in priming the thinking of individuals about the pandemic and the government’s response to it (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Of course, this analysis has certain limitations. Chief among these is the fact that the authors’ convenience sample included cartoons from only one syndication service. Cagle’s clientele primarily includes smaller newspapers that are unwilling or unable to employ their own cartoonist(s). This means that the potential exists that cartoons found on Cagle’s site are at least somewhat less edgy than those produced by cartoonists employed at larger newspapers or those found on other distribution platforms (e.g., Nick Anderson’s GoComics). Somewhat relatedly, the sample is limited inasmuch as several well-known editorial cartoonists like Ann Telnaes, Signe Wilkinson or Clay Bennett were not represented in the sample. While it may be argued that the average reader would be more likely to encounter a Cagle cartoon than one produced by one of these artists, the fact that the sample was drawn from a single mainstream source limits the authors’ ability to generalize, particularly from their secondary analysis, their results.

The second limitation of the study is that the sample of cartoons in the initial analysis was limited to what cartoonists were producing, not what newspapers were printing. Although it might be reasonable to assume there is some congruence between supply and demand in this regard, the authors cannot be sure. Finally, these cartoons were produced during a national (international) crisis. Together, these limitations remind us that it would be unfair to infer much from this analysis about the tone and messages of editorial cartoons in general.

This said, the authors have some confidence in their main findings. During the first 6 months of the Coronavirus pandemic, Cagle-associated cartoonists were generally following developments on the ground in their selection of topics and were acting as cheerleaders for establishment views and policies. The reality is that editorial cartooning, like satire, is to some extent culturally bound. For example, on September 17, 2001, Bill Maher (in)famously claimed that unlike the 9/11 terrorists, the United States had been “cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away.” He went on, “staying in the airplane when it hits the building. Say what you want about it. Not cowardly.” Shortly afterward, several big advertisers pulled their support of the show and it was canceled (Stern, 2017). The public was evidently not ready to hear Maher’s critical analysis. In context of a global public health crisis, about which little was initially known, it is unlikely that voices that were critical of establishment views would have been prominent.

This notion that satire and editorial cartoons are culturally bound leads to questions about future content. Will the seemingly increased sensitivity to certain types of humor we are witnessing lead to less edgy editorial cartoons? Their analysis reminds us that the social, cultural or political constraints mentioned above translate into something more basic, namely, commercial considerations. Messages that are too far from the mainstream are less likely to be commercially viable. Future research could take a deeper dive, so to speak, into the messages of cartoons available in various newspapers and websites, examining the relationship between the edginess of cartoons that appear in these outlets and their commercial success.
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