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By

Vijay Menon
The Contribution of Editorial Cartooning to Media and Society

I can't draw and I am a rather unfunny man. So, when Vic Valbuena suggested that I should address you this morning, I was more than a little puzzled. But then it struck me that it takes a peculiar kind of courage -- foolhardiness, might be more appropriate word -- to stand up before a room full of cartoonists and address them on 'The contribution of the editorial cartoon to media and society'. Having agreed to be foolhardy, I must now tell you what you know far better than I do!

An article in the Asian Wall Street Journal last year began:

"Newspaper cartoonists get paid to forget what their mothers always told them: nice people don't poke fun at funny-looking people". It went on to say that cartoonists thrive on spite, rancour, discord and villainy and they are fine-tuned to looliness.

Some of you may find it difficult to agree with that assessment. Randall Harrison, an American cartoonist, places cartoons on a slightly higher pedestal. He says, "Because the cartoons makes us laugh, it may not seem serious. But by most standards - social, psychological, economic, political or artistic - the cartoon is a unique force in modern society. And it seems to be growing in importance. European scholars...consider it a serious
reflection of society's inner vision. They see it as a vital form of art and communication which, in turn, shapes a society's perceptions.

That description should qualify Harrison to be called a communication scholar.

There is some disagreement about the origins and history of cartoons. Abu Abraham, a well-known Indian cartoonist, says that the art, as we know it today, began in Italy and developed in France, Germany and Holland but it was in England that it became a popular and powerful medium of dissent and democratization of society. However, we have it on the authority of the Straits Times that the cartoon as an art form existed in China for a long time. One of the earliest records of cartoons is believed to be a drawing by a Ming Emperor in 1465.

That would seem to make cartooning impressively ancient. But an American scholar named Westin gives us reason to be even more impressed. He suggests that the oldest known political caricature dates back to 1360 B.C.; it was an uncomplimentary drawing of King Tutankhamen's father. That would give political cartooning a 3350-year history of contribution to society.

There is one point on which all agree: there must be a free environment if cartooning is to flourish. Surprisingly, the most recent voice to be raised in support of cartooning freedom is
from Russia. Soviet art critic Ivan Podshivalov writing in The Democratic Journalists, bemoans the fact that from the initial years of Soviet government, cartoons were primarily expected to be politically charged... As the political regime grew tougher, humour and satire withered. The reason, he says is quite simple. In addition to intellectual ability and artistic taste, it is essential to include a certain heterodoxy, which is an important component of any personality.

The cartoon is acknowledged to be mass communication as it is seen by millions and it is always striving to communicate a message. The media have become more visual over the years and cartoons have contributed to this trend. In times of tension, high value is placed on humour and the cartoon is valued by readers for the break it provide from the daily dose of disasters that papers often serve up.

'Cartoon communication' is now recognised as a distinctive style or approach, which is particularly useful in communicating with children. It is no less valuable in increasing the acceptability of a serious message through a blend of humour and simplicity. But we must also be aware of the limitations of cartoons especially in Asia. They often reflect a cultural milieu; the urban symbols may not be readily understood in rural areas; and they are also influenced by language and region.
The cartoon, it has been said, can educate or irritate, tickle or tease, inform or reform. But it is also accused of being unfair and destructive, of over-simplifying complex issues and perpetuating racial and sexual stereotypes.

Much of this criticism has been voiced in the West. There is much more that can be done in Asean and in Asia to study the uses and abuses of the cartoon, its impact and influence. The cartoon has much unexplored potential, especially for communication in the diverse societies of Asia and this pioneering workshop will, hopefully, focus more attention on the cartoon, especially the editorial cartoon, as a medium of communication.

French and Spanish monarchs who did not take kindly to being ridiculed in cartoons often sentenced political cartoonists to prison, exile or death. But things have certainly come a long way since then. Cartoonists can now take heart from the example of Tong Wong Chun Loong of Hong Kong. He dropped out of school at the age of 14 to draw cartoons for a newspaper. Today, at 42, he is Hong Kong's comics king, lives in a 6.5 million dollar seaside villa and owns four cars. And, in all probability, draws no more cartoons.

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