

Mirrors and triggers: Historical approaches to printed press cartoons on the COVID-19 pandemic



by Cristina Blanco Sío-López

“Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art...”

Ursula K. Le Guin¹

As a team member of the GYA project *The COVID-19 Pandemic and Art*² and the *Science and Art = Peace + Justice* working group³, I was inspired to explore how artistic expressions mirror pluralistic, international and intimate expressions of living in a pandemic era, as well as how such expressions trigger alternative languages of the mind that are able to carve the foundations of hopeful and commonly inclusive futures.

The current global pandemic affects us all, both in terms of physical constraints and subjective perceptions. This “negative universalism”, characterised by transnational limitations, interdependent public health risks and constant indwelling touches upon high levels of uncertainty and social anxiety that cannot be sufficiently alleviated via outspoken messages. We are all in need of collective and non-only-verbal referents as renewed points of encounter of our fragmented cores.

Furthermore, art does unite such intuitive flows in a way that overlooks differences to encourage other forms of conversation. Against this backdrop, observing, exchanging and commenting on printed press cartoons through vividly transnational channels in digital media unleashes a promising chemical reaction for a reinvention of who we want to be in an unavoidable (?) new world in which we are striving to mesh proactive voices with positive societal impacts.

More particularly, international printed press cartoons invite historians to critically analyse the use of visual storytelling to address the multi-level complexities of our current COVID-19 context.⁴

Departing from the approaches of critical discourse analysis and visual semantics, cartoons offer a complementary examination of the key actors and factors in the consolidation of shared and transnational ways of expressing the development, challenges and hopes of growingly interconnected societies in the midst of this global pandemic.



In addition, cartoons connect an inherent iconic power with a taste of changing political priorities, societal concerns and critical interpretations of this rapidly shifting experience.

Most importantly, cartoons are not to be dismissed as a mere “mirror”, as they could also act as a revealing “trigger” in public opinion, especially when examining processes of contentious nature such as challenged notions of scientific expertise and intimate strategies to re-launch what makes us human beyond the constraints of the present.

The first question in this realm would be to ponder why cartoons particularly provide alternative thinking options concerning attitudes, reactions and forward-looking projects in light of the global pandemic. The main answer is that cartoons primarily propose the perspective of innermost perceptions by reflecting key societal topics such as the following: community-building around ground-breaking ideas; conflict-prevention and political stability at times of uncertainty; as well as discontent and increasing social divisions due to interrelated economic impacts. Indeed, cartoons express a delimitation of features of a reality in the making, as well as experimental paths through responses to crises that stand in opposition to a Kuhnian model of continuous progress without setbacks.

From this viewpoint, it is important to remember that many cartoons remind us of our own fragility and vulnerability – not as condemnation but as an encouragement to think beyond the limits of our conventional reality. That in itself is a form of liberation that is seldom expressed through texts on the pandemic and it makes the difference, not just bringing art as a therapeutic resource, but elevating it as a language to build a future that would not continue to exacerbate fundamental challenges such as environmental destruction or social inequality.

As Bertolt Brecht affirmed, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.”⁵ In this sense, cartoons as an activist and kinetic art form constitute neglected sources of analysis we have been missing for too long in our interdisciplinary studies. Further, they are good reminders of the fact that this pandemic not only ties us but also encourages us to investigate freer and differential modes of expression. In that respect, graphic sources powerfully highlight the semantic weight of historical turning points and directly illustrate (many times, at once) the origins and consequences of the ruptures of patterns.

Cartoons also emphasise the shaping and strategic power of contentious issues and empower us to deal with contextual challenges, as well as offer a response to the fundamental issue of counteracting diverse forms of social paralysis and uncoordinated crisis management.

Cartoons’ inner strength further illustrates what other types of (mainly) textual sources do not say, even if they are not exempt of an ideological element. That is why any project analysing printed press cartoons should aim to contrast these sources with key players’ testimonies, including the views of policy makers, scholars, civil society representatives, etc.

Printed press cartoons as sources for historical analysis in times of radical ruptures, fragility and fragmentation⁶ such as the COVID-19 pandemic grant the following empowering features:

- Cartoons act as a way of conveying utopias and forms of image projection for probable reality conformation and consolidation. The question that remains in this case is whether it is possible to measure such impact.
- Cartoons express social and contextual mindsets not transparently transmitted by conventional media. They also complete contextual and historical analysis.
- Inertia and free will appear as revealing interpretative keys in cartoons.
- Images are, indeed, window areas to tentatively play with seeming realities as a ground for potential transformative combinations.
- Cartoons are endowed with the pattern-tracing power of aesthetic models created to reflect and influence.

All of these characteristics converge, in André Gide’s perspective, on how “the scholar seeks truth, but the artist finds it.” As such, these features represent great potential for a bridge between research and policy-making around key societal issues surrounding the pandemic. This naturally requires that primary source preservation models be put into place, as is the case in the current collaborative experiences between “COVID-19 archivists” and historians of this pandemic.⁶

Last but not least, the critical intent and effect of printed press cartoons on the pandemic invite us not just to continuously fail forward, but to choose concrete paths. In this sense, we should not overlook diverse invitations to think that (self) betterment is a choice that can also be channelled through art and poetic reflections.⁷

Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind how printed press cartoons on the pandemic not only highlight the quality of navigating challenges, but they also, and very humanely, illustrate flaws, misconceptions and uncertainties that are shared beyond borders. This is also echoed by multidisciplinary art projects such as “Subject to Change: New Horizons”, in which the Barbican Young Creatives produce new, artistic work that explores the uncertain times we’re living in.⁸

Pain and uncertainty provoke wounds⁹ with universal reverberations that invite global reunions in which the decision of moving one step closer to each other remains always ours, reinstating a human capacity for reinvention as a right we should not dare to forget.

In sum, the manifold critical views unveiled by transnational cartoons allow for a breath of fresh (and much needed) air in our shared isolation: that is, the capacity to imagine a system other than the one that is being shattered and brought to the ground. The pieces are ours, and alternative languages gift us a constant capacity for inclusive and sustainable recombination.

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Notes

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