
What about Cartoons Makes People Mad? An Interview with Signe Wilkinson

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Signe Wilkinson, the editorial cartoonist for the *Philadelphia Daily News* and author of “One Nation, Under Surveillance” (available at Lulu), is a veteran of the cartoon wars. Her November 2005 cartoon critiquing black-on-black violence in Philadelphia was denounced by Philly’s top cop and garnered the newspaper weeks of letters.

“You need to know that Philadelphia has a rising homicide rate and 83 percent of the victims are young African Americans,” she explains. “I have done dozens of cartoons decrying the violence, the guns, the doofus do-nothing legislators and the rap culture. I needed traction and got it. The initial outrage warped into black readers (and talk show hosts) defending me and saying that yes, indeed, that this was black-on-black crime that couldn’t all be pinned on the ‘system.’”

In this interview, the cartoonist discusses the most recent, violent battle in the war triggered by the cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.

Steven Heller: In light of the Danish cartoons about Muhammad and the surrounding furor, do you believe these cartoons should have been published in the first place?

Signe Wilkinson: Yes. The editors meant to be provocative, but they had no way of knowing it was going to set off the war of the worlds. Furthermore, I believe the European papers should print the Muslim cartoons denying the holocaust and mocking Jews. Then, Europeans will have a full and frank view of the imagery that fuels some of the thinking in the Middle East. I’ve seen some of those cartoons, and they aren’t pretty.

Heller: I’ve seen some too, and they remind me of the vilification of the Jews by the Nazis in *Der Stürmer* (the infamous anti-Semitic weekly), as well as cartoons that have run on white supremacist papers and websites in the United States. When we open the doors to free speech, how do we prevent hatred and violence from pouring in?

Wilkinson: I wouldn’t hire a holocaust denier as my staff cartoonist, but when an Iranian paper starts a contest in response to the Danish controversy and asks cartoonists to draw about how the holocaust didn’t exist, I’d reprint a couple of the ensuing cartoons with an explanation and not on the main editorial page. When the Philadelphia Inquirer reprinted one of the Danish cartoons, it was relatively small, on an inside page with explanation of why they were doing it. It was not in any way endorsing the cartoon.

In response to some of my statements on this controversy, I've had some holocaust deniers email me. I suggest they send their wise and well-reasoned comments to our letters editor, and generally we don't hear from them again. If we did, we would run their letters (edited for spelling and length) just as we run all the letters vilifying me for my one-sided, idiotic, hateful drawings—if you can call them drawings, they're so badly penned.

Heller: Some cynics, myself included, believe that the days when editorial cartoons moved mountains have come to an end. This event proves that the cartoon is not dead, but many have been killed over it. Is this simply a blip—an unintended consequence—given the currents in cartooning today?

Wilkinson: It was a blip that's changed the world. I am no expert in Danish/Muslim affairs, but it seems to me that if it hadn't been cartooning, it would have been something else. In Holland, it was a filmmaker. In India it was Salman Rushdie, a writer. It wasn't the medium, it was the message.

Heller: While we'd like it to be, I would argue that freedom of speech is not absolute. There are circumstances where unbridled freedom can be injurious (i.e., the old canard of yelling "fire" in a theater). Restricting freedom can lead to breaks in an already fragile dam, but don't cartoonists have certain responsibilities too?

Wilkinson: Responsible cartoonists? There's a concept. You're ultimately suggesting that it's the cartoonists' responsibility to bridle their own freedom. I thought it was the editor's job to bridle our freedom.

Cartoonists are here to say what others can't or won't. American cartoonists at major newspapers generally aren't anywhere near the line you're describing. Your readers may not be familiar with American cartoonists' work because the New York Times barely runs them and almost never runs any with real passion. Times readers should be forgiven for thinking that cartoonists just draw punch-lines appropriate for Jay Leno.

Perhaps this is why some American editors are so shocked about the Danish cartoons. Those cartoons weren't just cute punch lines.

Heller: Many American newspapers did not reprint these cartoons, fearing they would trigger further insult. Didn't these editors have a point? (After all, the images were easily seen online.)

Wilkinson: The question facing editors in the United States was not about American cartoonists but about whether to reprint the Danish cartoons. It was an outrage that American citizens were being told a story, but being forbidden from seeing the cartoons that caused the problems.

If a paper decides they won't run them out of respect for Muslim readers' sensibilities, they must then follow the Vatican's injunction to never offend the beliefs of the faithful of any faith. Catholics would be absolutely justified to protest that the Times, for example, is perfectly happy to run Chris Ofili's canvas of the Madonna with elephant dung--something they feel is deeply offensive, but won't run a couple of dumb cartoons.

Lastly, I urge you to look up some of the bitterly anti-Catholic immigrant cartoons of everybody's favorite American cartoonist, Thomas Nast. Decide for yourself whether you would publish those cartoons that were run big and bold in the mainstream New York press 150-some years ago, then decide whether we'd have been better or worse for it. I could easily make an argument against running them, saying that those cartoons probably contributed to prejudice among native Protestant Americans and a bunker mentality among Catholics that kept them from becoming a full part of America for many decades. But our history has been to run them and other well-drawn, bitter, prejudiced images. And those cartoons were brilliantly drawn.

Heller: Nast's cartoons were brilliantly inflammatory to be sure, and in hindsight they are classic examples of acerbic satire. But in his day, there was little sensitivity in an American culture built on growing fear of immigrants and the power they were garnering. Today we live in more "sensitive" times. So are there limitations? And how far, would you say, can a cartoonist go to express an opinion?

Wilkinson: "Acerbic satire!!!" Those cartoons would be called intolerable hate speech today, and they would never have seen the light of day. And, can't you make the case that Danish culture suffers from a "growing fear of immigrants and the power they were garnering?" It was OK in America then. But not OK for Danes now to wonder whether their freedoms would be clipped by the newcomers.

Heller: But that was the mid-nineteenth century, and this is the twenty-first--the age of greater enlightenment and all that--but I grant your point. So what about limitations?

Wilkinson: There are no limitations for cartoonists; there are limitations on what various publications are willing to print. I have an ongoing relationship with my readers, which to me means that I don't take them for granted, and I don't insult their intelligence by avoiding certain topics. My standard is this: If any group of people, whether political, ethnic, or religious wants the government to do something that will affect my life (laws, taxes, editorial freedom, whatever), that group has wandered into the political sphere and should be treated as any other political operative.

Heller: What about aesthetic concerns? I've seen the Danish cartoons, and those that were directly about Muhammad were little more than stereotypical cartoon depiction of a very charged issue. In fact, they simplified and generalized the notion that all Muslims are terrorists, thus fanning greater flames of resentment. How should cartoons be edited so they retain the integrity of the cartoonist while maintaining intelligence?

Wilkinson: Cartoons are not New York Times opinion essays. We don't know what other cartoons any of the villainous Danish cartoonists have drawn that might have been sympathetic to the Muslims in their midst. I've done cartoons critical of radical Muslims and I've done cartoons critical of America's vast ignorance of all things Muslim. If you saw only one of my cartoons in the former category, you'd think I was just another bumpkin, reactionary, anti-immigrant, intolerant, Islamaphobe. That would be so unfair because I am a misguided reactionary on so many other issues as well.

As for aesthetics, if they'd been more felicitously drawn, would they have been any less offensive? If those cartoons had come in front of the Association of American Cartoonists, we would have flagged the bomb-turban one for being a cliché. It's, like, been sooo done already. They might as well have used Pinocchio. I thought some of the others weren't bad, though.

Heller: Would they have been any less offensive if they had better conceptual and visual quality? No. But they might have been more thought provoking. I know we can't always choose our battles (or wars, as Rumsfeld would say), and my implication that quality (or craft) should be a standard of free speech is ridiculous. But the cultural editor Flemming Rose's commission to interpret Muhammed left the door wide open to flagrant abuse of charged symbols, and as you note, to clichés—the hobgoblin of the cartoonist. Was this the best battle, battleground, and soldiers to fight the war from freedom of speech?

Wilkinson: To quote the brilliant Mr. Heller, "We can't always choose our battles." When I was president of the Association of American Cartoonists, we were asked to submit an amicus brief on behalf of Larry Flynt, whose well-researched and always-balanced publication, Hustler magazine, had run a nasty little cartoon making fun of Jerry Falwell's mother. Falwell sued. There was no question in my mind that we had to come to the aid of the poor little pornographer—which we did. He won the case, which establishes a clear defense of cartooning. The Supremes basically said that any idiot should be able to see that it's a cartoon. It's not fact. It's satire.

On the other point? you are such an editor. You are always worrying about controlling the content of the cartoons. Yes the editor opened the door, but the point he was making was that the door needed to be opened. The reaction proved his point that the European press was being intimidated into not saying what was on peoples' minds.

If I were an editor at one of the nation's premier daily newspapers, I'd worry less about cartoons in a distant country and pay more attention to keeping biased and ill-sourced reporting off my front pages.

Heller: This entire discussion raises the larger issue of press freedoms in the United States. You've noted that cartoonists are loosing a once respected independent foothold. Why is this happening? What factors contribute to newspapers, like the LA Times firing its editorial cartoonist and not replacing him?

Wilkinson: Let's see, could corporate profits have anything to do with it? No, certainly not, but several of my colleagues who have lost their jobs recently have said it was nothing personal—strictly cost savings. If I fall over dead this afternoon, I am fairly sure I would not be replaced.

Heller: I know the argument that corporations and news media are too cozy these days. But are there other perceived fears of the power structure (or the populace) towards acerbic cartoons? Hey the taboo-busting Simpsons have been popular for over a dozen years.

Wilkinson: My daughter was sent home from public kindergarten for wearing a Simpsons t-shirt. So you can see that I'm just as insensitive a parent as I am a cartoonist.

Newspapers are priggish and they are dying as people move to where they can find unbridled satire—the internet, Jon Stewart, the Simpsons and the like. Americans say they want family-friendly venues, which newspapers mostly are. They just don't want to read or pay for those newspapers. In the past there were many newspapers so any one of them could be wildly partisan and bitterly satirical of the other side. With only one newspaper in most towns, there really is only one side. Press monopoly was a brilliant strategy for a while, but corporate newspapering is managing to kill itself off.

Wilkinson: As noted above, I do censor myself in so far as I just don't do certain kinds of cartoons for the Philadelphia Daily News. I do gardening cartoons for gardening magazines, rowing cartoons for a rowing newsletter, and in the Daily News, I stick to issues that are covered by the Daily News. The Danish cartoon controversy was in the Daily News so I drew about it. Several of my (extremely insightful and brilliant) cartoons on the subject did not see print. But I argued that if we didn't use an image of Mohammed, we would lose all rights to use any image of any revered figure. I thought long and hard before doing one that expressed my view that if there is a god or gods, he/she/it/they would find any visual description of him/her/themselves humorous in its abject inability to capture the divine.

The Daily News ran my cartoon last week, and so far we have received one letter to the editor. My suspicion is that people don't mind if a caricature is nice to their group, they just mind if it's negative. If those Danish cartoons had been positive images of Mohammed, none of this trumped-up fury over depicting the prophet would have happened.

Heller: In the final analysis, should cartoonists be given greater leeway than other journalists?

Wilkinson: Yes. But we do need editors to correct our spelling.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).