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Metaphors and Topoi of H1N1 (Swine Flu) Political Cartoons: A Cross-cultural Analysis

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Beginning with the notion that the discourse of political cartoons reflects and reinforces public opinion (Edwards and Winkler 1997; Michelmore 2000; Greenberg 2008; and Dwivedi 2009), this chapter takes a multidisciplinary approach to political cartoons about the H1N1 virus (swine flu) to elucidate how fears are addressed through language and media cross culturally. Seventy three cartoons were culled from India (n=31), the United States (n=24), and other countries (n=18). The analysis, focusing on the metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and topoi (Medhurst and DeSousa 1981: 200) found in these cartoons, shows how a nation’s swine flu cartoons play on associations and fears relevant to that particular nation’s culture(s).

3.1 Political cartoons

Cartoons do more than entertain. Hull (2000) examines the cartoons of Matt Groening for evidence of Foucaultian philosophy, Han (2006) examines Japanese cartoons and their reflection of Japanese-Korean relations, and O’Brien (2008) discusses the power of visual texts, specifically political cartoons, as catalysts for student writing. Other scholars of history, media, anthropology, linguistics, and other fields have researched political cartoons for visual and rhetorical presentation of stereotypes, identity promotion, and appeal to audience. In her analysis of political cartoons surrounding Indian Partition, Kamra (2003: 1) notes, ‘While letters to the editor, articles, aphorisms, gossip columns are lively indeed, and obsessively political, editorial cartoons surpass these forums of opinion in their wrestling with a vexed political process by recoursing to heavily inflammatory visual rhetoric.’ Likewise, Douglas, Harte, and O’Hara refer to cartoons as ‘encyclopedias of
popular culture’ (1998: 1, cited in Michelmore 2000: 38) to which scholars may turn for ‘clues to ideological forces, beliefs, assumptions, and prejudices at work in society,’ or as Morris puts it, ‘[e]ditorial cartoons are a metalanguage for discourse about the social order’ (1991: 225). Thus, analysis of political cartoons presents itself as a viable genre for research on shared ideologies and culture of a particular readership.

Political cartoons are unique in their place in a newspaper, where a fictional or at least exaggerated account is created for a current, newsworthy situation. According to Greenberg (2008: 195), ‘Though they speak of the world in hyperfigurative terms, political cartoons are but one mode of opinion news discourse that enables the public to actively classify, organize and interpret what they see and experience in meaningful ways.’ For Michelmore (2000: 37), ‘[c]artoons do not just illustrate the news. They are graphic editorials, and like all editorials they analyze and interpret a situation; they pass judgment. They tell readers what to think and how to feel about what is happening – amused, sympathetic, chagrined, angry, afraid.’ Not only do political cartoons tell readers what to think and how to feel, they ‘legitimate (and thus facilitate) the grounds upon which some things can be said and others impeded’ (Greenberg 2008: 184). The visual image serves as a situational field, or ‘politicized context,’ (Edwards and Winkler 1997: 305) in which ideologies are grounded, recontextualized, and evaluated according to the cartoonist’s agenda. For Lorenz (in Steffen 1995:144), a (political) cartoon has the ability to influence a reader as well as reflect some internal part of the reader.

Through a variety of rhetorical and visual strategies, the cartoonist compels polarity from readers regarding a given topic, ‘motivat[ing] differ[ing] senses of community’ (Edwards and Winkler 1997: 305). Individual readers will have varying degrees of shared cultural knowledge, and the understanding of a cartoon depends both on this knowledge and on the ‘interpretation strategies suggested by the (near) identical circumstances under which the cartoons are accessed’ (Forceville 2005: 247). Shared cultural knowledge is key to reader understanding of and connection to a particular cartoon (see Kamra 2003). For Medhurst and DeSousa (1981: 220), the ‘culturally-induced message’ is the source for different interpretations of cartoons by readers; as such they construct a taxonomy to uncover assumed shared cultural background by political cartoonists.

The notion of shared cultural knowledge, in addition to examination of metaphors employed and fears exploited, factors heavily into our analysis of H1N1 cartoons. There are many rhetorical devices at cartoonists’ disposal by which readers may be brought into a shared