

For many cartoonists in the world, their work puts them in danger

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People gather in solidarity for the victims of an attack against a satirical paper, in Paris, Wednesday, Jan. 7, 2015. Masked gunmen shouting "God is great!" stormed the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo Wednesday, killing 12 people, including its editor, before escaping in a getaway car. It was France's deadliest terror attack in living memory. Photo: AP Photo/Thibault Camus

The opinion page of a newspaper is a place that can cause controversy and anger. While opinion articles often make readers angry, political cartoons connect with readers, and sometimes enrage them, in a powerful way.

In the U.S., political cartoonists often receive angry letters, furious emails, personal insults. Sometimes, they even get death threats.

Usually the threats can be safely ignored. But this week in France, anger over political cartoons caused a tragedy — 12 people were killed when gunmen attacked the offices of a paper.

French paper Charlie Hebdo had caused anger in the past by publishing cartoons that were seen as offensive to Muslims. The cartoons showed the Muslim Prophet Muhammad in a very negative way. Muslims do not show their prophet in drawings. They find doing so to be offensive.

Insulting Opponents, Exaggerating Issues

For cartoonists, causing anger is part of the job. Political cartoonists use a powerful set of tools to argue their points. The cartoonists caricature people, drawing them to look ridiculous. They make fun of opponents, and insult them. They exaggerate issues, showing them in black and white, literally.

Cartoonists don't follow the usual rules of polite, respectful debate.

Kevin Siers, a Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist with the Charlotte Observer in North Carolina, explained that while opinion articles can balance different viewpoints, cartoons are more direct, more powerful.

You can't argue with a cartoon, it just hits you, Siers said.

Ann Telnaes was up early and working when she first heard about the Charlie Hebdo attack. Telnaes is a cartoonist with the Washington Post. She was shocked and horrified by the news. She immediately began drawing a cartoon in response. She wanted to honor the dead, and express her anger.

The website poynter.org is collecting cartoons drawn in response to the attack. Cartoonists have used the pen to express support for the killed journalists, and to stand up for free speech. They use cartoons to reach out, and to mourn.

"Grab You Quickly"

Telnaes said she has received threats because of her work. One was serious enough to bring in the FBI. She said cartoons have a special power to connect with people. This also gives them a power to make people extremely angry.

Because cartoons are visual, anyone can understand them, regardless of what language they speak.

"A really well-drawn editorial cartoon should grab you quickly," Telnaes said.

Insulting or mocking religion often offends and enrages people. Pat Bagley knows this firsthand. He lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, the center of the Mormon church. Bagley, a former Mormon, drew cartoons that attacked Mormon prophet Gordon B. Hinckley.

Many people were offended by the cartoons, Bagley said. "They said I had crossed the line."

No one directly threatened to kill him, Bagley said, but he did get scary emails. "People let me know they own guns, they know how to use them, and I should be careful," he said.

Every group of people has their "sacred cows," Bagley explained. These are ideas or symbols that they feel strongly about. People can become angry if an outsider makes fun of these "sacred cows."

A Reminder For Cartoonists

In 2005 to 2006, the world witnessed the Muhammad cartoon crisis. A dozen cartoons showing the Muslim prophet in a negative way were published in a Danish newspaper. Hundreds died or were injured in Muslim countries during protests over the cartoons.

Bagley pointed out that cartoonists in the U.S. don't face the same anger or threats as cartoonists in other parts of the world.

"In Europe and the Middle East, they take cartoons deadly seriously," Bagley said. "In the U.S., we're more entertainers, and we don't get quite the respect or the response they do in Europe or the Middle East."

Cartoonists are rarely attacked or killed in the U.S., Bagley said. "It happens all the time in the Middle East, and it happens way too often in South America and sometimes in Europe. It's really depressing," he said.

Clay Bennett, an award-winning political cartoonist at The Chattanooga Times Free Press in Tennessee, explained that writers have "a thousand pebbles to throw every day. A cartoonist has a brick."

Joel Pett is an award-winning cartoonist at The Lexington Herald-Leader in Kentucky. He said the massacre in France serves as a reminder for cartoonists. It should tell them not to waste their opportunity "to draw about something that matters."

It's so tempting to pick something in pop culture "or something that has absolutely no importance," said Pett, who also helps lead the group, Cartoonists Rights Network International. "People are dying out there for free speech. Those of us who enjoy it owe it to them to use it in a responsible way."