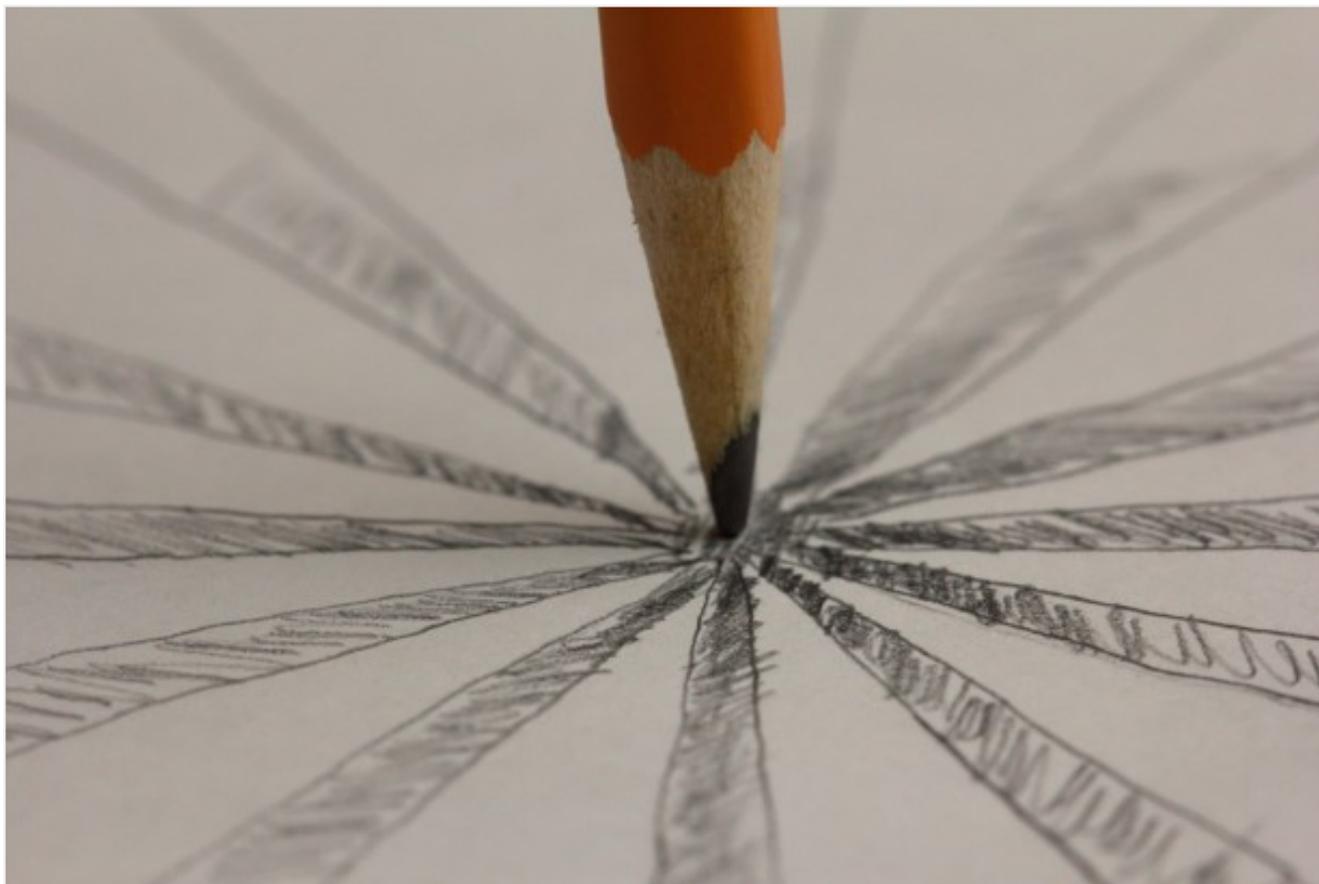


The Atlantic

GLOBAL

The Abuse of Satire

Garry Trudeau on *Charlie Hebdo*, free-speech fanaticism, and the problem with “punching downward”



Reilly Butler/Flickr

GARRY TRUDEAU | APR 11, 2015

My career—I guess I can officially call it that now—was not my idea. When my editor, Jim Andrews, recruited me out during my junior year in college and gave me the job I still hold, it wasn't clear to me what he was up to. Inexplicably, he

didn't seem concerned that I was short on the technical skills normally associated with creating a comic strip—it was my perspective he was interested in, my generational identity. He saw the sloppy draftsmanship as a kind of cartoon *vérité*, dispatches from the front, raw and subversive.

Why were they so subversive? Well, mostly because I didn't know any better. My years in college had given me the completely false impression that there were no constraints, that it was safe for an artist to comment on volatile cultural and political issues in public. In college, there's no down side. In the real world, there is, but in the euphoria of being recognized for anything, you don't notice it at first. Indeed, one of the nicer things about youthful cluelessness is that it's so frequently confused with courage.

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In fact, it's just flawed risk assessment. I have a friend who was the Army's top psychiatrist, and she once told me that they had a technical term in the Army for the prefrontal cortex, where judgment and social control are located. She said, "We call them sergeants."

In the print world, we call them editors. And I had one, and he was gifted, but the early going was rocky. The strip was forever being banned. And more often than not, word would come back that it was not the editor but the stuffy, out of touch owner/publisher who was hostile to the feature.

For a while, I thought we had an insurmountable generational problem, but one night after losing three papers, my boss, John McMeel, took me out for a steak and explained his strategy. The 34-year-old syndicate head looked at his 22-year-old discovery over the rim of his martini glass, smiled, and said, "Don't worry. Sooner or later, these guys die."

Well, damned if he wasn't right. A year later, the beloved patriarch of those three papers passed on, leaving them to his intemperate son, whose first official act, naturally, was to restore *Doonesbury*. And in the years that followed, a happy pattern emerged: All across the country, publishers who had vowed that *Doonesbury* would appear in their papers over their dead bodies were getting their wish.

So McMeel was clearly on to something—a brilliant actuarial marketing strategy, but it didn't completely solve the problem. I've been shuttled in and out of papers

my whole career, most recently when I wrote about Texas's mandatory transvaginal probes, apparently not a comics page staple. I lost 70 papers for the week, so obviously my judgment about red lines hasn't gotten any more astute.

I, and most of my colleagues, have spent a lot of time discussing red lines since the tragedy in Paris. As you know, the Muhammad cartoon controversy began eight years ago in Denmark, as a protest against "self-censorship," one editor's call to arms against what she felt was a suffocating political correctness. The idea behind the original drawings was not to entertain or to enlighten or to challenge authority—her charge to the cartoonists was specifically to provoke, and in that they were exceedingly successful. Not only was one cartoonist gunned down, but riots erupted around the world, resulting in the deaths of scores. No one could say toward what positive social end, yet free speech absolutists were unchastened. Using judgment and common sense in expressing oneself were denounced as antithetical to freedom of speech.

And now we are adrift in an even wider sea of pain. Ironically, *Charlie Hebdo*, which always maintained it was attacking Islamic fanatics, not the general population, has succeeded in provoking many Muslims throughout France to make common cause with its most violent outliers. This is a bitter harvest.

Traditionally, satire has comforted the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable. Satire punches up, against authority of all kinds, the little guy against the powerful. Great French satirists like Molière and Daumier always punched up, holding up the self-satisfied and hypocritical to ridicule. Ridiculing the non-privileged is almost never funny—it's just mean.

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By punching downward, by attacking a powerless, disenfranchised minority with crude, vulgar drawings closer to graffiti than cartoons, *Charlie* wandered into the realm of hate speech, which in France is only illegal if it directly incites violence. Well, voila—the 7 million copies that were published following the killings did exactly that, triggering violent protests across the Muslim world, including one in Niger, in which ten people died. Meanwhile, the French government kept busy rounding up and arresting over 100 Muslims who had foolishly used their freedom of speech to express their support of the attacks.

The White House took a lot of hits for not sending a high-level representative to the pro-*Charlie* solidarity march, but that oversight is now starting to look smart. The French tradition of free expression is too full of contradictions to fully embrace. Even *Charlie Hebdo* once fired a writer for not retracting an anti-Semitic column. Apparently he crossed some red line that was in place for one minority but not another.

What free speech absolutists have failed to acknowledge is that because one has the right to offend a group does not mean that one must. Or that that group gives up the right to be outraged. They're allowed to feel pain. Freedom should always be discussed within the context of responsibility. At some point free expression absolutism becomes childish and unserious. It becomes its own kind of fanaticism.

I'm aware that I make these observations from a special position, one of safety. In America, no one goes into cartooning for the adrenaline. As Jon Stewart said in the aftermath of the killings, comedy in a free society shouldn't take courage.

Writing satire is a privilege I've never taken lightly. And I'm still trying to get it right. *Doonesbury* remains a work in progress, an imperfect chronicle of human imperfection. It is work, though, that only exists because of the remarkable license that commentators enjoy in this country. That license has been stretched beyond recognition in the digital age. It's not easy figuring out where the red line is for satire anymore. But it's always worth asking this question: Is anyone, anyone at all, laughing? If not, maybe you crossed it.

The above is the text of remarks Garry Trudeau delivered on April 10 at the Long Island University's George Polk Awards ceremony, where he received the George Polk Career Award.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GARRY TRUDEAU created the *Doonesbury* strip in 1970.
