METAPHORICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF CHARACTER AND ISSUES IN POLITICAL CARTOONS ON THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

By

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Abstract

Political cartoons are single panel graphics that comment on political events and policy, and serve both to define the significant topics of political discourse and record them, thus creating a "snapshot" of the political climate in a given time period. Building on previous scholarship, this analysis explored the main themes of 187 daily newspaper and online cartoons on the 2004 presidential debates and inquired into ideas that were expressed about the candidates individually, the issues, and the debate process as a whole -- especially through the use of metaphor as a rhetorical device to convey meanings. Specifically, it explored whether cartoons focused primarily on the candidates' character traits, their issue positions, or some other aspect of the debates. This analysis of political cartoons on the 2004 presidential debates found that traits were the primary focus as compared to issues, but revealed more complex forces at work than the traditional tension between image and issues. The heavily mediated nature of the debates as political events and the resultant attitudes towards this media influence were explored through cartoons that emphasized personality over policy, and media spectacle over substance.

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Preface

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Introduction

Political cartoons are the most extreme form of expression found in newspapers, as they are not bounded by norms of journalistic objectivity (Koetzle & Brunell, 1992; Lamb, 2004) or even the domain of objective reality that encompasses other newspaper editorials. As such, they have historically been a source of satirical critique of the political status quo. Since “editorial cartoons are oriented towards extreme interpretations of campaign events, “they are free to “discuss, investigate, and lampoon topics that are . . . generally left untouched by the media at large” (Koetzle & Brunell, 1992, p. 96.)

Defined as “a graphic presentation typically designed in a one-panel, non-continuing format to make an independent statement or observation on political events or social policy” (Edwards & Winkler, 1997, p. 306), the editorial (or political) cartoon often employs humor or irony to point out shortcomings or hypocrisies within the political system. While many studies (including this one) use the terms “political cartoon” and “editorial cartoon” interchangeably, some do differentiate between comic strips with political content (such as *Doonesbury*), and single panel cartoons that make commentary on politics and policy. The latter would generally appear on the Editorial or “Op-Ed” page of a printed newspaper, and were the focus of this study.

A look back at editorial cartoons throughout American history reveals that they have been influential in local and national politics in their day, and now serve as unique windows into the political climate of decades past (Fischer, 1996; Hess & Northrop,

1999). Unlike during the heyday of American print journalism, newspapers are no longer the main source of political news and information. However, even in today's media climate, with significant competition from cable news and the Internet, newspapers are still second only to television as the primary source for political information (Horrigan, Garrett, & Resnick, 2004). The Internet is growing though as a source of news that either augments or offers an alternative to traditional news sources. Additionally, consolidation of media ownership has led to fewer distinct "voices" in the media environment -- especially for newspapers -- and this cut has certainly been felt in the world of editorial cartooning (Lamb, 2004; Ludtke, 2004).

Using imagery, metaphor, symbolism and other rhetorical devices, the cartoonist defines political situations and attempts to interpret them visually in a way that is ideally both amusing and thought provoking. Metaphor is an especially appropriate focus of study, because it is a device with recognized rhetorical capabilities in both verbal texts (e.g., Jamieson, 1980; Osborn, 1967; Stelzner, 1965) and visual texts (e.g., Bostdorff, 1987; Edwards 1993, 1995, 1997, 2001; El Refaie, 2003; Morris, 1993). Metaphor is not simply the substitution on one concept or image for another. Instead, it encompasses a complete transformation whereby two originally distinct meanings are "merged so that a new meaning is effected" (Edwards, 1997, p. 29). In this way, metaphor is far more than a linguistic device; it is a mode of thinking and a method of interpreting reality. In fact, it is believed that "the mechanisms underlying metaphor exist in the mind independently of language" (El Refaie, 2003, p. 76), and certainly is observable that a visual metaphor

such as one found in a political cartoon is "sometimes able to convey a complex message in a much more immediate and condensed fashion than language" (p. 87).

Stelzner (1965) wrote that "the predominant interests and ideas of any period are reflected in its figurative language which in turn affects and influences the subjects to which it is applied" (p. 52). The metaphors and other figurative devices used in the visual language of political cartoons are a powerful example of this, since some of the key functions of political cartoons are the reflection and maintenance of power relationships in a given political structure, and the definition of significant issues that are topics of political discourse. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, political cartoons, past and present still serve as a unique record of the particular events, attitudes and narratives present during a moment in political history (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982; Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981). These sociopolitical functions of political cartoons can be observed in cartoons dealing with the debates held during the general election phase of the American presidential race. As a moment in political history, the Presidential campaign:

> . . . affords the opportunity to study an issue national in scope and significant in outcome. Focusing on a particular event in the nation's (recent) history fulfills the historical perspective on political cartoons. Presidential campaigns are potent areas for rhetorical study because of their significant outcomes and because they are presumed to be periods of national agenda-setting and self-examination. (Edwards, 1997, p. 40)

Specifically within the campaign cycle, the debates have been shown to be an important sources of information regarding candidates issue positions (National Annenberg Election Survey (2004); Holbrook (1999); Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Pfau, 2002), as well as opportunities for audiences to evaluate candidates on personality

dimensions (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). This study was influenced by previous research on depictions of presidential candidates in political cartoons (e.g., Buell & Maus, 1988; Edwards 1995, 1997, 2001; Koetzle & Brunell, 1996), especially Koetzle & Brunell's (1996) analysis of political cartoons in the presidential campaign in 1992 which analyzed the extent to which candidates' personal images or their stances on political issues dominated cartoon depictions. Taking a cue from these scholars' findings and methodologies, this study set out in part to see if, four elections later, this was still the case. Other scholars' observations have also suggested that image and personality often trump issues and policy in political cartoons (Edwards 1995, 2001; Gamson et al., 1992; Winfield & Yoon, 2002).

This study specifically focused on cartoons regarding the 2004 general election debates, since the debates are a key source of political learning for voters, and present candidates largely in terms of their personal images and stances on key issues (Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; Benoit, Hansen & Stein, 2004; Benoit, McKinney, & Holbert, 2001; Holbrook, 1999). Through a rhetorical analysis of cartoons from three days before the first debate to three days after the final debate, this study examined the messages expressed (through use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor), and analyzed each cartoon for the extent to which a candidate's character traits and persona, or policy goals and issue positions were the focus.

The debates provide an ideal opportunity for cartoonists to unleash their critical powers upon a set of political events dealing with important topics at a time when public

interest and attention are high. However, the approach of these so-called most extreme viewpoints in the newspaper to what was arguably the most informative part of the campaign was unexpected. Cartoons focused largely on superficial aspects of the candidates' debate performance, and on the media spectacle surrounding the debates, versus the important political issues and policy goals ostensibly discussed by the candidates in this public forum.

While this suggests that editorial cartoonists may have grown reluctant to address serious, hard-hitting topics or neglected the opportunity to engage in truly critical commentary, this research argues that in 2004 editorial cartoonists fulfilled their function of reflecting the political structure and defining the topics of concern, providing insightful meta-commentary about the role of the media in the 2004 debates that carries implications for the campaign process as a whole, as well as the continued relevance of editorial cartoons in political discourse.

Literature Review

Over recent decades, scholars from various disciplines have lamented the lack of critical attention paid to political cartoons (e.g., DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982; Edwards, 1997; Koetzle & Brunell, 1996; Langeveld, 1982; Tunc, 2002). Political cartooning has been aptly described as comprising a "neglected genre of political communication" (DeSousa & Medhurst, p. 84). Many disciplines have flirted with it -- including journalism, political science, education, speech, and sociology -- yet "no discipline has truly embraced the study of political cartoons" (Diamond, 2002, p. 252). The problem seems to lie in this very variety of approaches, through which historians, philosophers and psychologists have often viewed the political cartoon solely as a work of art or expression of humor (e.g., Gombrich, 1963; Paletz, 2002). Diamond argued that relegating political cartoons to the categories of humor or satire does them a disservice, since satire and humor are not necessary elements of the cartoon. Instead, political cartoons are best studied as "political symbols" (Diamond, 2002, p. 252).

Rhetorical Study of Cartoons

Rhetoric, defined as "the attempt by one person or group to influence another through strategically selected and stylized speech," is studied by analyzing how people choose "what to say in a given situation, how to arrange or order their thoughts, select the specific terminology to employ, and decide precisely how they are going to deliver their message" (Medhurst & Benson, 1991, p. vii). Interpreted broadly, this definition applies not only to the traditional realm of oratory, but also to non-oratorical forms of

communication such as journalism, literature, music, film, and of course graphic arts such as political cartoons (Medhurst & Benson).

Medhurst and DeSousa (1981) were among the early scholars arguing to expand the scope of rhetorical studies to non-oratorical discourse, including political cartoons. They developed a “taxonomy of graphic discourse” (p. 1) to facilitate the rhetorical analysis of political cartoons. In doing so, they demonstrated that the framework of oral discourse still applied to visual forms, but was merely realized through different techniques. The main subjects of cartoons (or “inventional resources”) were identified as: “political commonplaces, literary/cultural allusions, personal character traits, and situational themes” (p. 200). The basic forms of rhetorical arrangement in cartoons are contrast, commentary, and contradiction, to which cartoonists add a number of stylistic elements in order to refine their message (Medhurst & DeSousa).

Use of metaphor is among the key methods employed by cartoonists to convey their messages. Metaphors can define and interpret key actors or events (Bostdorff, 1987; Seymour-Ure, 2001), and even contribute to candidate image (Edwards, 1995, 2001). Bostdorff explained how metaphor works: “By labeling something that which it is not, metaphor makes use of perspective by incongruity; our perception of the object/person is altered by its incongruous pairing with some other name. In this way, metaphor provides insight” (p. 48). Studies on metaphor use specifically in political cartoons have often examined how clusters of recurring metaphors worked to construct political candidates’ character (Edwards, 1995, 1997, 2001). Edwards’ 1993 study of metaphors of enmity in

political cartoons about the Gulf War demonstrated that: “metaphor is a key tool of the political cartoonist used in defining terms and issues. The visual depictions presented by political cartoons give metaphorical definitions a concreteness that affirms the ‘reality’ of their meaning” (p. 66). Political cartoons, utilizing metaphor, symbol, and other figurative and rhetorical devices, can be interpreted as part of a broader pattern of “symbolic contests” for which the media provide an arena: “Symbolic contests are waged with metaphors, catch phrases, and other symbolic devices that mutually support an interpretive package for making sense of an ongoing stream of events as they relate to a particular issue” (Gamson & Stuart, p. 59).

Functions of Cartoons

Research on the effect of political cartoons on public opinion is incomplete and inconclusive. Few scholars have studied the extent to which readers’ opinions are influenced by the views expressed by cartoonists (or vice versa). While at least one small-scale study suggested that editorial cartoons could cause opinion change (Brinkman, 1968), others (Carl 1968, 1970) discovered that readers seldom received the meaning that the cartoonist was attempting to express. It seems that interpretation of cartoons can be rather subjective.

However, this apparent disconnect between message and reception -- though it requires far more scholarly research to be confirmed or denied -- does not necessarily make cartoons insignificant. These images still serve important sociopolitical functions (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982; Edwards, 1995). The rhetorical devices used in political

cartoons can be used to define social groups (Greenberg, 2002; Morris, 1993); convey values, attitudes, and beliefs (Cahn, 1984); and reveal "the interrelationships of people, events, and power" (DeSousa & Medhurst, p. 84). This last, according to DeSousa & Medhurst, is the primary sociological function of the political cartoon, which is essentially "a culture-creating, culture-maintaining, culture-identifying artifact" (p. 84).

On this socio-cultural level, cartoons reveal assumptions and prejudices (Michelmore, 2000), tapping into the collective consciousness (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981) in a way that reaffirms cultural values and assists readers in "maintain[ing] a sense of self, others, and society" (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982, p. 90). DeSousa & Medhurst determined four functions of political cartoons: entertainment, aggression reduction, agenda-setting, and framing. These functions illustrate well how the rhetorical approach to understanding political cartoons ties together the previous psychoanalytical and sociological perspectives.

More specific to political policy and history, cartoons assist in defining the significant issues that are topics of political discourse (Edwards, 1993) and at the same time create a record of that discourse as a sort of snapshot of the political climate. Cartoons both "promote the symbols of the existing national consensus" (Edwards, 1995, p. 33), and "reflect dominant images in the American imagination" (Edwards, 1993, p. 73). These images serve as historical and sociological artifacts: "that reflect a record of events, visible through the imaginative weave of the cartoonist's viewpoint . . . . political

cartoons historicize the present and form a collective record of the social imagination regarding events in political life” (Edwards, 1997, p. 8).

While they may not alter the power relationships in a given political structure, they do play an important symbolic role in maintaining them. By showing “the interrelationships of people, events, and power,” (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982, p. 84), political cartoons are forms of symbolic interaction that serve as a means of “mirroring, . . . reviewing, or . . . remembering . . . the dominant culture” (p. 85). DeSousa and Medhurst insist that:

> The power of the political cartoon lies not in the specific artist’s intent or success at fostering change but in the degree to which, and the manner by which, the cartoonist taps the collective consciousness of readers and thereby reaffirms cultural values and individual interpretation of those values. . . . The cartoon generally functions not as a change agent but as a statement of consensus, an invitation to remember cultural values and beliefs and, by implication, to participate in their maintenance. (p. 85)

For these reasons they can be used as a lens through which to view and interpret political history (e.g., Fischer, 1996; Hess & Northrup, 1996), as well as to educate students in current political affairs (Dougherty, 2002). This ability of cartoons to shape “political social reality” (Bormann, Koester, & Bennett, 1978, p. 328) -- in other words, to frame dialogue and define issues -- is accepted by most scholars of political cartooning (e.g., DeSousa & Medhurst, Edwards, 2001; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Greenberg, 2002). According to Greenberg, “cartoons ‘frame’ phenomena by situating the ‘problem’ in question within the context of everyday life and . . . exploit ‘universal

values' as a means of persuading readers to identify with an image and its intended message" (p. 182).

Presidential Campaign Cartoons

Scholarly studies have explored political cartoons in a wide range of roles, from their treatment of political leaders (Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, & Airne, 2001; Bostdorff, 1987; Fischer, 1996; Seymour-Ure, 2001) and national icons (Edwards & Winkler, 1997; Fischer, 1995), to foreign enemies (Diamond, 2002; Edwards, 1993; Gamson & Stuart, 1992; Winfield & Yoon, 2002). Of most interest to scholars, however, are political cartoonists' depictions of would-be leaders during American presidential elections (e.g., Bormann, Koester & Bennett, 1978; Buell & Maus, 1988; DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982; Edwards 1988, 1995, 1997, 2001; Koetzle & Brunell, 1996; Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981; Sena, 1985; Sewell, 1998). Some have focused on the pre-election period or primaries, some on the entire election, but it seems that none have specifically zeroed in on the debates as a pivotal moment in election coverage, and few have thoroughly analyzed the extent to which candidates' personal images or their stances on political issues dominated cartoon depictions, as Koetzle & Brunell (1996) did.

Most studies of cartoons during presidential campaigns have focused on the tone of the cartoons' messages, the role of cartoons in extending candidates' definitions of themselves and each other, and the emphasis given in cartoons to superficial versus serious matters. The overwhelming negativity of political cartoon depictions of political candidates is so well documented (Bormann, 1978; Buell & Maus, 1988; DeSousa &

Medhurst, 1982) that Koetzle & Brunell (1996), upon confirming those results, concluded, “negativity is the hallmark of editorial cartoon reporting” (p. 94). This negativity can take many forms, including caricature of the target’s appearance, criticism of their hypocrisy, or expressions of frustration with the election process as a whole.

Edwards’ study of the 1988 campaign (1995) found “specific metaphoric clusters that sharply and consistently defined candidates, or groups of candidates” (p. 29). An example would be a “metaphor of diminishment,” such as portraying a candidate as a child in order to convey the message that he is unfit to lead (Edwards, 1995). Conversely, physical stature and strength are a visual analogue to political power, in cartoon terms (Sena, 1985). Generally, character traits that are exaggerated in cartoon must have basis in reality in order to be recognized and effective (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981). The persistent metaphors used as methods of attack can contribute to candidate image development during the pre-primary portion of the presidential race (Edwards, 2001). Later in the campaign, the debates create a scenario in which all candidates appear at once, providing a forum for direct comparison in cartoons as well as real life (Koetzle & Brunell, 1996).

In studying the 1988 presidential primaries, Buell & Maus (1988) found that cartoons focused largely on frontrunners (i.e., the ‘horse race’) and “oddity candidates” (p. 849). Similarly, Koetzle & Brunell’s (1996) analysis of the following presidential campaign in 1992 concluded, “cartoons are less interested in policy and more concerned with candidate personalities and the nature of the campaign” (p. 94). Other scholars’

observations have also suggested that image and personality often trump issues and policy in political cartoons (Edwards 1995, 1997, 2001; Gamson et al., 1992; Sena, 1985; Winfield & Yoon, 2002). In fact, Edwards (1997) found that candidates' personal character was "the dominant issue that emerged in the political arena represented by cartoons" during the 1988 campaign (p. 13). Koetzle & Brunell cited the rise of candidate-centered (as opposed to party-centered) politics in the 1970s and 1980s as the logical explanation for the lack of attention paid to policy: ". . . if the central consideration of a voter is *who* should govern, then the most pressing electoral concerns involve the candidates traits" (p. 94).

Voter learning and media coverage of debates

Debates are a "key element of a campaign" because they present the candidates in a format that allows for easy comparison (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). Within the 2004 presidential election cycle, the debates were a pivotal moment when citizens' interest peaked, and the candidates' policy stances were clearly communicated. The National Annenberg Election Survey (2004), for example, found that the debates served to clarify the candidates' issue positions. This is in keeping with the literature on political learning and presidential debates. Holbrook (1999) defined political learning as the "acquisition of political information as a consequence of exposure to the campaign process" (p. 68). His meta-analysis of responses to National Election Survey questions regarding the presidential debates from 1976 to 1996 concluded that the debates were an important source of information, especially about lesser-known candidates. Other

scholars have confirmed that viewers learn about candidates' issues positions by viewing presidential debates (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Pfau, 2002).

Another meta-analysis of debates from 1976 to 2002 (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003) found that watching the debates not only had a positive effect on issue knowledge, but also an agenda-setting effect regarding which issues viewers considered important. Furthermore, the debates crated a "clear opportunity . . . to influence perceptions of the candidates' personality" (p. 345). Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert (2001) -- following the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse, which "holds that political campaign discourse can address two factors: policy (issues) and character (image)" (p. 262) -- confirmed that post-debate improvement on dimensions of character and policy differed by candidate. Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert emphasized that, "while issue and persona may be empirically related, they remain conceptually distinct; each element is present in candidate messages and they may have discrete effects" (p. 261).

Benoit, McKinney, and Holbert (2001) further distinguished personal qualities and leadership ability as the two forms of character utterances. They concluded "policy stance and leadership became significantly more important factors in vote choice after watching the debate" (p. 267). Supporting this is the recent empirical data from the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press (2004) survey on post-debate impressions of candidates, which found that Bush had a "stronger personal image," whereas voters had more confidence in Kerry on "key domestic issues" (p. 1).

Ultimately, both policy stances and character matter to voters because they are both crucial to fulfilling the responsibilities of the office to which the candidate will be elected (Benoit and Brazeal, 2002). While policy comments dominate the content of the presidential debates (Benoit and Brazeal, 2002), the nature of television as a medium forces increased focus on persona (Pfau, 2002) and raises the possibility of indirect influence of debates through various news media (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). For example, the 2004 Benoit, Hansen, and Stein study found that while newspaper coverage of primary debates discussed policy more than character, they still emphasized character to an extent disproportionate to the actual debate content: "there was less emphasis on policy (60%) and more on character (40%) in newspaper stories than in the debates themselves" (p. 255), for which the actual content was 65% policy and 35% character.

Approaching political cartoons as a form of rhetorical communication allows us to study how a range of rhetorical devices, including metaphor, operates to define and interpret events and individuals in this visual medium. It also gives greater insight into the social and political functions of cartoons, including how they convey social attitudes and reveal power structures. Political cartoons serve both to define the significant topics of political discourse and record them, thus they "historicize the present" (Edwards, 1997, p. 8).

In the case of presidential campaigns, cartoons work to frame the dialogue by assisting in defining candidates and interpreting campaign events. Unlike news reporting, their perspective is subjective, allowing for a more critical tone and a greater focus on

superficial matters such as character traits versus issues. Scholars have paid little attention to the specific role of political cartoons in interpreting the presidential debates, even though the debates are important forums that allow for comparison between candidates and facilitate learning about political issues and candidates' positions.

This study explored how candidates and political issues were depicted in cartoons about the 2004 presidential debates: What were the key topics? What metaphors were used to express cartoonists' ideas? Did personality still dominate over policy, even with wars and terrorism as key campaign issues? What can a rhetorical analysis of political cartoons reveal about the social and political milieu of this pivotal period of the election?

Method

Based on the existing literature, the specific research questions devised for exploration in this study were as follows:

RQ1--What ideas did campaign 2004 debate cartoons express (through use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor) about the candidates individually, the issues, and the debate process as a whole?

RQ2--Do the cartoons focus more on candidate's character traits/persona, policy goals/issue positions, or some other aspect of the debates?

A qualitative rhetorical analysis was performed on a sample of political cartoons created by professional editorial cartoonists and published in print newspapers and/or online during a timeframe ranging from three days before the first presidential debate to three days after the final debate (27 September – 16 October 2004). The cartoons were collected from a central online repository of editorial cartoons, former American Association of Editorial Cartoonists president Daryl Cagle's Professional Cartoonists Index Page at http://www.cagle.com/. This site, featuring the work of over 90 American cartoonists, is the most comprehensive online database of editorial cartoons, and has been utilized by past researchers as a reliable, convenient, and comprehensive source of political cartoons from a wide range of publications (in terms of geographic area and circulation).

A comprehensive search of the site by topic, artist and date yielded a sample of 187 cartoons that specifically pertained to the three presidential debates held on 30

September, 8 October, and 13 October, 2004. Debate-specific cartoons were identified by a combination of visual cues (for example, both candidates shown side by side at podiums) and verbal cues (ex. a caption or label including the word “debate” or its variations). Cartoons that addressed only the vice-presidential debate were not included. The total number of cartoonists/publications represented in this sample was 78.

The coding scheme used to analyze the cartoons consisted of items identifying the cartoon (ex. name of cartoonist, name of publication, date published); listing the actors depicted (ex. George Bush, John Kerry, male TV viewer, etc.), describing the metaphors expressed (ex. the debates were a hurricane), identifying the location of the scene (ex. debate, television studio, home), and summarizing the key message or messages expressed by the cartoon (ex. Bush is a poor debater, Kerry is inconsistent, debates are ineffective).

These cartoons were also evaluated to determine whether they addressed (or at least alluded to) any specific political or social issues, either foreign or domestic (ex. war in Iraq, taxes, health care). Additionally they were analyzed for any evaluations (positive or negative) of a candidate’s personal character traits. The primary traits identified in the course of this analysis were: demeanor, rhetorical skill, stature/maturity, independence, and consistency. These traits, and the metaphors through which they were expressed, will be defined and discussed in greater detail in the Results section of this paper.

Results

Character

This study indicated that, as in previous campaigns, candidates' personal character trumped their policy stances as topics of political cartoon discourse. While the key foreign policy issue of the 2004 election -- the war in Iraq -- did stand out as the most often-mentioned issue in the realm of cartoons, references to issues of policy (foreign or domestic) overall were rare compared to depictions of various personal character traits of the candidates (80 policy references versus 159 character references). While this emphasis on personal character traits over policy issues may suggest to some a lack of depth in political cartoons, the cartoons do in fact make valid observations about the candidates individually, as well as define the ideal qualities of a candidate and debate performance. Demeanor, rhetorical skill, stature/maturity, consistency, and independence were identified as the personal character dimensions on which the candidates were most frequently evaluated in the cartoon sample. Each is discussed separately in the following subsections, with all parenthetical references referring to the cartoons listed in the Appendix, unless otherwise specified. Quoted text is taken from labels, captions, or dialogue in the cartoons.

Demeanor. The trait category of demeanor included all behavior and deportment of the actor during the course of the debates. This included textual references in the cartoons to the candidate being "presidential" or "statesmanlike," as well as visually

appearing, or textually described as being impatient or sullen, engaging in behaviors such as grimacing or sighing, or otherwise acting nervous, rude, et cetera.

Bush's demeanor in political cartoons ranged from catatonic (Beattie, 2004) to jittery and hyperactive after drinking "Texas-sized coffee" (Cagle, 2004) or even so "bouncy" that he was metaphorically transformed into the cartoon character Tigger (Anderson, 2004). He was castigated through cartoons for behaviors during the first debate, including making faces (Branch, 2004C); blinking or squinting (Koterba, 2004A), whining, staring, pouting, and slouching (Sack, 2004B); for appearing petulant, angry (Ohman, 2004D) and peevish (Ohman, 2004B), and for responding in a "sharp," "testy," or "sarcastic" manner (Lane, 2004B). Some cartoons depicted Bush working with a debate coach, or otherwise assessing his performance. In preparation for the next debate, he was advised not to repeat these mistakes, but instead to act and appear "presidential" (Lane, 2004B).

Kerry's demeanor was generally depicted in a negative manner as well, with accusations of being a "rambling bore," "uptight snob," and "humorless stiff" (Babin, 2004A) -- characterizations reminiscent of previous depictions of Al Gore in the 2000 election. Kerry's long face surely made cartoons showing him as sullen (Anderson, 2004; Babin, 2004B) or expressionless (Ohman, 2004B; Siers, 2004) more common, (especially since they are easy to draw and quick to resonate with the audience). However, at least one artist chose to interpret Kerry's gravity as "statesmanlike" (Branch, 2004B).

This concept of being “statesmanlike” or “presidential” is key to understanding the political cartoonist’s treatment of the candidates’ demeanor in this sample of cartoons. There is a certain undefined quality that makes a candidate sufficiently presidential to capture the respect and admiration of the voting public. While it may be impossible to pin down, it can at least be defined in terms of what it is not. Treading a fine line between confident and arrogant, between reserved and dull, the presidential quality is a tenuous one -- one that, according to the cartoonists, neither candidate mastered.

Rhetorical Skill. Rhetorical skill included depictions or descriptions of the candidates as either adept or incompetent at debating, guilty of using stale speech, “sound bites,” circumlocution, and the like. While both candidates were attacked frequently for using “scripted” rhetoric and empty phrases, relaying on “canned” (Crowe, 2004A) or “taped” (Morin, 2004A; Sack, 2004A; Thompson, 2004B) messages, uttering one-liners, and repeating themselves (Morin, 2004B), these characterizations were often applied to both candidates at once within a cartoon, or were used to comment on the institution of presidential debates overall.

On an individual level, Bush’s rhetoric was most often represented as simplistic, especially when compared to Kerry’s. Bush was depicted as having an absurdly simple message (Branch, 2004A) or rebuttal (Breen, 2004), or as giving simple but incorrect answers to questions (Gorrell, 2004B). One cartoonist used the visual metaphor of a wind-up toy to emphasize Bush’s repetition of such infamous phrases as “bring ‘em on,”

"mission accomplished," and the like (Benson, 2004B), while another accused him of lacing his responses with "stock phrase[s] about freedom and democracy" (O'Connor, 2004).

Kerry's rhetoric was characterized as being at the opposite extreme -- complex, but all too often to the point of being incomprehensible. Several cartoons made reference to his skill and reputation as a debater (Catalino, 2004A; Kelley, 2004; Ramirez, 2004), and one included praise for his "convincing" and "stoic oration" (O'Connor, 2004). However, Gorrell's (2004B) likening of Kerry's words to a complex mathematical equation (and one without an answer, at that!) indicated that his rhetoric may have been over the heads of some viewers, as much so as if he had spoken French (which he did in one cartoon) (Lester, 2004B).

Taking a jibe at the lack of substance in the debates and suggesting an overall downturn in the quality of political discourse over time, cartoonists expressed that the 2004 debates did not hold up upon comparison to the Lincoln-Douglas debates, (Cohen, 2004A; Deering, 2004B) or even the Kennedy-Nixon debates (Ohman, 2004A). From the viewpoint of the cartoonists, there was a clear disconnect between the ideal and actual rhetorical styles employed by the candidates in 2004. Overall, their words were depicted as too predictable, hackneyed, and repetitive. There was a sense that nothing new was being said in the debates, implying that voters were not receiving any new information, which is presumably one of the goals of presidential debates. Furthermore, the stale

nature of the candidate's speech suggested an inability to connect with their audience and perhaps even a lack of sincerity in their messages.

Stature and Maturity. Stature and maturity stood out as two interrelated traits on which Bush was particularly vulnerable to the satirical pens of the cartoonists. Depictions of Bush as childlike or inordinately small in stature were common through caricature or metaphors of diminishment. Such metaphors of diminishment, examined in detail by Edwards' study (1995) of the 1988 race, seem to have carried over from depictions of the elder president Bush, who was also depicted often by cartoonists as a child or miniature man. The height difference between the two candidates was exaggerated, with Bush appearing either very short (Crowe, 2004A, 2004B; Englehart, 2004; Keefe, 2004) or even in miniature (Crowe, 2004B, Plante, 2004B). He was shown standing on a stool (Benson, 2004A, 2004C), phone books (Britt, 2004) or a ladder (Plante 2004B) in order to reach the debate podium. Concurrent with these images were visual or verbal/textual references to childhood or a candidates' "inner child" (Benson, 2004A), untied shoes, reading a children's book (Benson, 2004C). One cartoonist drew Bush acting like a child on the verge of a tantrum, being talked down to by a father-like Cheney and promised ice cream after the debates if he did well (Sheneman, 2004). Another opted to express Bush's perceived immaturity (and perhaps comment on his intellect as well) through a clown-like costume, complete with beanie (Day, 2004). None of the cartoons sampled make references to or evaluations of Kerry's perceived maturity, although some caricatures of

his appearance -- including his deeply wrinkled face -- could have also been intended as commentary on his age.

Independence. As shown by the Cheney-as-father cartoon, Bush's maturity/stature were often correlated with independence, a trait that included Bush soliciting or receiving criticism, advice, assistance, or approval from senior advisors and staff or cabinet members (especially Dick Cheney and Karl Rove). Speculation that Bush may have been receiving answers from a transmitter worn under his jacket was a popular topic of Internet gossip, and was picked up by cartoonists as an opportunity for visual gags, as well as commentary on Bush's dependence on others. Cartoons showing a person or device hidden under Bush's jacket usually identified the individual or messenger as Senior Advisor Karl Rove (Cohen, 2004C; Trinidad, 2004B; Crowe, 2004G; Powell, 2004C), but others left the identity ambiguous or undefined (Babin, 2004D; Stein, 2004). One cartoonist imagined Bush's back covered with transmitters receiving signals from a host of special interest groups -- including, but not limited to, the gun lobby, drug companies and big business (Sack, 2004C).

Rove's influence over Bush also was expressed by drawing him either simply preparing Bush for the debate (Branch, 2004A), or more maliciously by depicting Rove as a ventriloquist and Bush as his metaphorical dummy (Crowe, 2004G). Cheney was also shown to be an influence on, or even surrogate for, Bush in the debates. Bush took notes on Cheney's performance (Crowe, 2004F), and requested (Varvel, 2004B) or begged Cheney to debate in his place (Ramsey, 2004B). The most extreme expression of

Bush's dependence on Rove and Cheney, however, left Bush out altogether. It was a cartoon image of Rove stuffing Cheney into a Bush costume to participate in the second debate (Powell, 2004B).

While no man, or president, is an island, the prominence of "handlers" and advisors, especially in the cartoons about Bush, clearly accused him of relying too heavily on the opinions of others. Although Kerry was depicted a few times as caring too much about the opinions of France (Payne, 2004B) or needing to conduct a poll before answering a question (Britt, 2004A), such images were rare and hardly as malicious as the many directed towards Bush. Over the decades, it seems that the role of others in shaping the messages, images, and policies of president has become more prominent, to the point that Karl Rove is now a recognizable figure and almost household name. The implication of many of these cartoons is that the presidency has a more manufactured quality than was previously admitted.

Consistency. During campaign 2004, the Bush camp frequently referred to Kerry as a "flip-flopper" (a metaphorical description itself) to convey his actual or perceived changes in his position on the Iraq war and other issues. The appellation apparently resonated with cartoonists, either because they thought it apt, or simply because it was easy to illustrate. Surprisingly only three cartoons featured an actor directly calling Kerry a "flip-flopper" (Morin, 2004B; Payne, 2004) or his actions a "flip-flop" (Branch, 2004B), and there were thankfully no extensions of the metaphor to "flip-flop" style shoes in the cartoons sampled, although "waffles" did make a cameo (Grondahl, 2004).

Most common were references to Kerry debating himself (Huffaker, 2004A; Markstein, 2004A; Marlette, 2004; Ohman, 2004A; Payne, 2004; Ramsey, 2004A), which was depicted either verbally -- for example, giving a rebuttal to his own statements (Stantis, 2004) -- or visually, such as by having two podiums labeled with his name (Marlette, 2004; Payne, 2004). Other cartoonists drew Kerry as having multiple personalities (Kallaugher, 2004) or faces (Summers, 2004), being inconsistent (Catalino, 2004B), changing positions (Wasserman, 2004), or sending mixed messages (Streeter, 2004B).

The fact that this “flip-flopper” label on Kerry stuck so well and was continued repeatedly in the political cartoons means that it obviously resonated with a number of cartoonists and voters. While the inclusion of the “flip-flop” label was sometimes possibly a jab by cartoonists at Bush and/or the Republicans for resorting to repetition, distortion, and name-calling, that meaning may have been lost on many readers given the subjective nature of cartoon interpretation. Regardless, the frequent depictions of Kerry as having two minds about an issue, to the extent that often visualized as metaphorically debating himself as well as his opponent, makes it clear that consistency was a key dimension in this election on which Kerry was particularly vulnerable, and his opponents and the media repeated it tenaciously.

While often seen as a superficial counterpoint to the “issues,” personal character traits such as those discussed above are certainly not outside the pale of qualities desirable in a leader, and are increasingly a source from which voters glean information to make their decisions. However, they are not historically meant to be the focus of

presidential campaigns, and certainly not of debates, which are specifically centered on discussion of issues. The fact that these qualities were foregrounded in cartoon discourse about the debates suggests their possible prominence in media discourse overall, as compared to specific policy issues. Perhaps cartoonists were simply representing the actual circumstances of a media and public more interested in the somewhat superficial traits than the serious issues. Or, it may be argued that personal qualities are simply easier to express in the visual terms of a political cartoon (especially metaphor) than are complex policy issues and stances.

Either way, the cartoonists images are telling -- by pointing out the shortcomings of both candidates, they may show a picture of electoral politics at their worst, yet they also suggest an ideal in their debunking of the powerful. A president perceived as dependent on his vice president or senior advisor to make decisions, define messages, and even shape the president's identity is hardly the figure of leadership desired by the American public. A candidate who can not seem to make up his mind about where he stands on any particular issue, one who must conduct polls to determine his own stance, is no ideal model either. However, these were the "realities" depicted by the cartoonists of the 2004 debates -- two extreme images, one mutually exclusive choice. Measuring both candidates against the ideal, voters may only have a choice between the lesser of two evils, but scholars can also see the definition of what was desired in a candidate at that moment in political time. By drawing a clear picture of the undesirable traits in a political candidate -- namely a hackneyed rhetorical style, immaturity, dependence on

advisors, inconsistency, and overall “unpresidential” demeanor -- the editorial cartoonists implied an ideal that, in their view, neither candidate fulfilled. The ideal presidential candidate in the 2004 debates would have spoken in a meaningful and intellectual way on the political issues at hand, showed deference and respect to his opponent, maintained a stately deportment, been resolute on his positions and independent of outside influence.

Overall, the negativity of cartoon content in evaluating candidates could create in newspaper readers a less favorable image of the candidates. This is in opposition to the tendency of the 2004 debates to slightly raise, or at least maintain unchanged, television viewers’ favorable opinions of the candidates (National Annenberg Election Survey, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2004).

Policy

While overshadowed by the focus on personality, policy issues were still depicted in the political cartoons and are worth examining for their role in these debate cartoons. Foreign policy references in this sample included the war in Iraq (or war in general) and the coalition of US allies fighting in Iraq, terrorism or terrorist attacks, national security, weapons proliferation, and others. Iraq was clearly the dominant issue, and terrorism (including specific reference to Osama bin Laden and the September 11, 2001 attacks, as well as more general depictions) was next most frequently represented issue.

Only one cartoon (Huffaker, 2004C) depicted Iraq as a strong point for Bush (literally his strong arm in a arm wrestling match). Others ranged from graphically portraying images or reminders of the situation either by making use of the quagmire

metaphor (Ariail, 2004A) to imply that American soldiers are "stuck" there (while simultaneously recalling descriptions of Vietnam as a historical referent), or employing more straightforward but less visual means by mentioning a lack of exit strategy (Crowe, 2004D). Textual mentions or visual images of violence and destruction included references to "bombings, kidnappings, beheading and attacks" (Rogers, 2004B), showing Iraq as a flaming overturned car (Rogers, 2004A) or representations of death (such as a dead soldier (Britt, 2004B), skulls (Ariail, 2004A), or gravestones (Bateman, 2004). These images and metaphors are in sharp contrast to those depicting Bush's "rosy view of Iraq" (Jones, 2004) as a place filled with sunshine, singing birds, blooming flowers and butterflies (Arial, 2004A). These cartoons, as well as one indicating Bush's need to literally put on a happy face when discussing Iraq (Breen, 2004B), clearly suggested that the issue was a weak point for Bush. Pointing out inconsistencies between Bush's words and deeds by flaying such gaffes as his "Mission Accomplished" sign (Duffy, 2004) or his insistence on the strength of the Iraq coalition, especially after Kerry "forgot Poland" (Babin, 2004C; Bateman, 2004B; Duffy, 2004) were also popular ways that cartoonists used to issue to illustrate a larger message about the candidate's ineffective policies.

While many of the cartoons dealing with foreign policy issues such as the war in Iraq and terrorism alluded to the consequences of those policies (such as symbols of death), few cartoons on domestic policy went beyond simply listing or mentioning the issues, (and some did not even go that far, simply lumping together undefined "domestic issues" (Huffaker, 2004C; MacGregor, 2004B). Specific domestic policy references in

this sample included the economy, taxes, jobs/unemployment, health care, social security, government spending, education, and a number of special interests. Financial issues (including mentions of the economy, recession, deficit, tax cuts, and government spending) dominated the domestic side, but with only ten occurrences. Health care (also including health insurance and Medicaid) tied with employment (including references to jobs and unemployment) as the second most represented domestic issue with a scant four occurrences each.

The economy was often part of a general list (Trinidad, 2004A, Ramirez, 2004; Wasserman, 2004B), as opposed to being given a discrete visual depiction such as drawing the deficit as a pit that put Bush on lower footing than Kerry in the debate (Huffaker, 2004D). Government spending was treated similarly -- usually just mentioned (Ramsey, 2004A; Trever, 2004), although one (albeit very text-heavy) cartoon defended Bush as having "inherited a recession" and credited his tax cuts with fueling economic recovery (Ramirez, 2004). The issue of jobs/unemployment again was more often mentioned in text along with a list of other issues (Trinidad, 2004A; Ramirez, 2004), versus being depicted graphically (such as the visual metaphor of a ticking time bomb in Bush's suit (Ohman, 2004C), implying that Bush ignored the issue at his own peril). The same goes for health care, which was sometimes part of a list (Trinidad, 2004A; Wasserman, 2004B), and only once treated as a separate issue, in a cartoon showing a couple watching the debates on TV. The man says, "I think I'm going to be sick," in response to the viewing the domestic issues debate, to which the woman replies, "Our

health insurance no longer covers that" (Ramsey, 2004C). Domestic issues in this sample were often grouped together in general terms rather than standing out separately (as Iraq did for foreign policy issues). This lack of definition in the cartoons suggests that the issues also may not have been identified clearly by the candidates, or that they were not considered as important to the voters (or interesting to the media), as the "hot-button" foreign policy issues.

While the foreign policy and domestic policy issue categories did not overall differ as drastically in frequency of representation as was expected, (considering the dominance of Iraq and terrorism as topics in the national media and the candidate's campaigns), it must be remembered that quantifying visual data may soften the dramatic effects of the original medium. Forty-seven foreign policy references to thirty-three domestic policy references is not a large difference in a sample of 187, but the fact that almost half of those foreign policy references were to Iraq indicates that the war was clearly a dominant issue in the campaigns and debates, and therefore in the political cartoons as well. Also, the dominance of more visual representations of the Iraq issue made it a more noticeable and memorable issue than any of the more vague domestic issues, which seldom stood alone as the focus of any given cartoon. This focus on Iraq as a hot-button issue most likely mirrors its prominence in other media during the campaign, as well as the candidates' frequent discussion of the war. Likewise, the lack of attention paid to smaller domestic issues at a national level, if replicated in other media, would suggest that the importance of low-profile issues that nonetheless affect citizen's daily

lives is largely being overlooked by the media and not sufficiently addressed by the candidates.

Other Targets: Debates, Spin, and the Media

Taken as a whole, both image and issues could be seen as the substance of the 2004 debates, since both dimensions of debate rhetoric impart information about the candidates that assist voters in making a decision. Such is the goal of the debates. However, many cartoonists choose to place far greater emphasis on aspects of the debates completely peripheral to the two individual candidates. While Bush was attacked far more often than Kerry, the cartoonists overall were more likely to skewer *both* candidates, or an intangible, nonpartisan target such as the debates overall, or "spin" and "the media." An exploration of these other focal points and how they were treated will illuminate why they may have merited such prominence.

Debates. When targeted, the debates in general were most often faulted for having too many rules (Cohen, 2004A; Combs, 2004; Crowe, 2004A; Harville, 2004; Huffaker, 2004D; Koterba, 2004A; MacGregor, 2004A; Powell, 2004A; Wright, 2004A), which were in fact restrictions negotiated by the Bush and Kerry campaigns (although this was not always clear in the cartoons themselves). The debates were also depicted as not giving voters they wanted (Deering, 2004A; Markstein, 2004B; Stantis, 2004C;Walters, 2004; Wright, 2004B), be that information or entertainment, or both. The game show-like debates (Trinidad, 2004A; Matson, 2004) lacked substance (Plante, 2004A; Wilkinson, 2004), were seen as meaningless, not taken seriously (Huffaker, 2004B), and failed to

hold the interest or attention of voters (Gorrell, 2004C; Lester, 2004A; Thompson, 2004C).

Sporting metaphors were frequently used to translate the debates from complex, intellectual and rhetorical discussions into simple physical contests with clear winners and losers. These were in keeping with Blankenship's (1980) observations on the predominance of sporting or gaming metaphors in political discourse, metaphors that were originated by both the candidates and the media. The most frequent of such metaphors was likening the debates to a boxing match (Benson, 2004E; Conrad, 2004; Harville, 2004B; Powell, 2004A), with dueling equally popular among cartoonists (Benson, 2004D; Combs, 2004; Payne, 2004C; Stantis, 2004B). One cartoon pointed to the news media as the originators of such hackneyed sports metaphors, showing the "scripted and predictable" post-debate commentators deeming that the candidate's had a "hit a home run" or a "scored a touchdown" with their debate performance (Thompson, 2004A).

While no cartoonists seemed to suggest that physical prowess was truly a factor in either candidate's debate performance, the depiction of the debates as sport instantly lowered their status to that of the trivial and ephemeral. Similarly, equating the debates to a game show (Trinidad, 2004A) or reality television contest (Bish, 2004) gave them an air of more spectacle than substance, even while bringing them down to a fairly pedestrian level given the pervasiveness of such television fodder. The debates were stripped of their depth and importance, and instead the emphasis was on the competitive

nature of the race, and the preoccupation with winning and losing. These simplifications did not originate with the cartoonists, however, it is the "the penchant of the press to focus on internal campaign matters like tactics, strategy, candidate performance and horse race" that led to coverage of the 2004 debates that was "less likely than four years ago to describe how campaign events directly affected voters -- explaining, for example, the possible implications on citizens of a candidates' policy proposal" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004, p. 1).

Spin. The debates themselves or the post-debate analyses were often represented as being full of "spin," or consisting of nothing but spin. "Spin," -- referring to biased portrayal of an event -- has become a popular buzzword and it is an easy but ultimately elusive target, since it can originate from the candidates' campaign communications, media coverage, or both. Of the 12 cartoons that targeted "spin" or "spinners" as a topic of criticism, four used a storm or hurricane metaphor (Koterba, 2004B; McClosky, 2004; McKee, 2004A; Varvel, 2004A) and five used a laundry (washer/dryer) metaphor (Arial, 2004B; Bagley, 2004; Gorrell, 2004A; MacGregor, 2004B; Menees, 2004).

Effective metaphors, as defined by Foss (2004), "contain implicit assumptions, points of view, and evaluations. They organize attitudes toward whatever they describe…" (p. 301). Therefore, the laundry metaphor is ineffective because it does little if anything to illustrate the true nature of political spin (itself a metaphor) or its effects. In fact, the positive connotation of cleanliness makes the laundry metaphor counterintuitive. However, the storm metaphors are more appropriate in the context of spin. Many of these

cartoons mentioned wind or hot air (representing empty rhetoric) and mud (representing negative campaigning, as in “mudslinging”). Some even showed citizens or reporters being buffeted or otherwise victimized by the storms, a depiction which strongly suggests the negative, destructive effects of “spin” on modern political discourse.

Media. The media in general (Branch, 2004C; Zyglis, 2004), and Dan Rather in particular (Breen, 2004; McKee, 2004C), were characterized in the cartoons sampled as being partial to one candidate or another, and were accused of trying to tell the public what to think about the candidates (Huffaker, 2004E; Streeter, 2004A). The media were shown as more focused on trivial matters (such as Martha Stewart) than the debates (Brookins, 2004) and were given an undue amount of respect by audiences (Horsey, 2004B).

Television sets, cameras, and microphones made frequent appearances. In the cartoons, forming an undercurrent of commentary about the mediated nature of the debates (and by extension the election as a whole). Cartoonists, with the artistic license to deviate from reality and draw the debates as occurring “live” or conveyed through television, often chose to include the TV set. Citizens were often shown to be relatively passive observers of the “democratic process” in action. While they may have “participated” by responding to their TVs, talking to one another, changing the channel, walking away, sleeping, etc., they were usually at least one step removed. Even debate audiences were silent, faceless.

The media, however, were a more active component of the cartoon world of the debates, actively reporting on, opining on the events. They were nearly inseparable from the concept of "spin," whether creating it, disseminating it (perhaps unknowingly) by reporting it, or being victimized by it along with the public. The cynicism of the offhanded references to spin and media bias -- a taken for granted tone versus one of outrage or dismay -- is disturbing.

Discussion

In conclusion, this analysis of the political cartoons on the 2004 presidential debates revealed more complex forces at work than the traditional tension between image and issues. The heavily mediated nature of the debates as political events and the resultant attitudes towards this media influence were explored through cartoons that emphasized personality over policy, and spectacle over substance.

While media consolidation has perhaps blunted their once sharp teeth known for biting critique and cutting satire, cartoonists still have chops. Cartoonists may be holding back slightly, but they are still making valid commentary and revealing important analyses of current political climate. Presidential debates, as seen through cartoons, have become more personality-based then issue-based, but this may very well be part of a larger trend whereby political images and events are manufactured and mediated. The real issue is the role of the media in modern American politics

Political cartoons occupy a liminal space between objective reality and fantasy. As “media insiders who position themselves as outsiders,” cartoonists tend to “hold themselves apart from generalizations about the media” (Edwards, 1997, p. 143). Thus negotiating their own space, cartoonists may see the media as the problem, yet consider their work part of the solution. Not bounded by journalistic norms (excepts perhaps considerations of taste) political cartoonists are free to create their own “truths” in the course of commenting on society. These “truths” are not bounded by the limits of what really happened or what really is -- John Kerry did not have two podiums set up from

which to debate himself, and George Bush is not so short he required a stepladder to reach the podium. Yet each of these images was grounded in the realities of the debate context, (i.e., height differences that were required to be de-emphasized in filming, and the mysterious “bulge” in the back of the president’s suit). This is the heart of the transformative nature of metaphor, whereby the ability to redefine what something is by depicting it as something it objectively is not means that through cartoons, “fictions extend from actualities and develop new realities” (Edwards, 1997, p. 128). Each of these images exaggerates the actual in order to invent a new reality that offers greater fodder for critique, which is no less valid than if it were based on the real reality – it is just more powerful and forceful.

In the 2004 debate cartoons, metaphor remained a powerful weapon in what Gombrich (1963) termed the “cartoonists’ armoury.” The ability of metaphor to create meanings not easily expressed otherwise (especially in the case of visual metaphors), was clearly demonstrated in cartoons delineating aspects of candidates’ personal character, as well as those emphasizing foreign policy over domestic issues, or graphically depicting the detrimental effects of “spin” on political discourse. If left to literal, objective texts, these messages would come across as didactic and weak. However, in the hands of political cartoonists they are made more forceful and memorable by the use of metaphor and image.

While the agenda-setting effects of political cartoons have yet to be proven, they certainly illuminate the agendas created by other news media. By placing greater

emphasis on character over issues, and the focusing more on the overall media treatment of the debate rather than their substance, political cartoons reflected the climate of the 2004 debates through a fun-house mirror, exaggerating slightly only to create a new truth. One of the more persistent "truths" emphasized by cartoonists regarding the 2004 debates was that they were largely dominated by the media and filled with hollow, "spun" messages. There is more than a little truth to that "truth." If the focus on personality over policy, and spectacle over substance makes cartoons appear superficial, perhaps the problem lies not in the medium – the cartoonist is only the messenger.

Further research

Further research comparing actual debate content to that of the cartoons could determine the extent to which cartoons present an "accurate" analysis of the debates (by at least matching them in focus and emphasis). Ancillary comparison of other news coverage of the debates to that of cartoons would reveal whether editorial cartoons follow, or deviate from overall patterns in media coverage of the debates. Additional research on public opinion regarding the debates, and the role of the media in reporting on them, would also assist in determining voter's priorities and whether they align with the viewpoint expressed through political cartoons. Such research would assist greatly in determining whether cartoons serve an agenda-setting function and/or reflect the political zeitgeist in a meaningful way.

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