



# Going or already gone?

Symposium considers whether political cartooning is a dying art

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News correspondent

IOWA CITY — For its 75th birthday, the University of Iowa's School of Journalism and Mass Communication is turning to an arguably dying tradition — political cartoons. Almost two dozen political cartoonists and editors are invited to campus for a symposium Thursday through Saturday on political cartooning. Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Paul Conrad, a UI graduate, will be the main speaker. The symposium, open to the public, is the main event of a yearlong birthday celebration.

The UI journalism school was the first to recognize political cartooning, a staple in American journalism and debate, as a legitimate field of study. It offered this country's first college cartooning course in 1949.

The symposium comes at a time when school leaders and featured cartoonists agree that the profession is in troubled, or at least changing, times.

"This form of endangered journalism may be heading for the endangered species list," says John Soloski, UI professor and director of the journalism school. "There are fewer and fewer editorial cartoonists every year."

Soloski estimates there are fewer than 150 full-time editorial cartoonists in the United States and fewer than 100 newspapers that run cartoonists regularly. "It's an important form of journalism that's often taken for granted," he says.

Editor & Publisher, a professional newspaper journal, reported last year that fewer than 10 of the 1,500 daily newspapers in the United States employ their own full-time editorial cartoonists. That is "down by almost half over the last 15 years," according to the article.

Joe Sharpnack of Iowa City, an editorial cartoonist for The Gazette, says cartooning still has a vast impact. "Give me the reigns of 'The

Simpsons,' and I'll change the world," he says. Steve Benson, cartoonist for the Arizona Republic and president of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists, says it is not an exaggeration, however, to say that "the traditional bastion of the editorial cartoonist is undergoing significant change."

There are fewer daily newspapers, Benson notes, and readers increasingly are seeking alternative news sources, such as weekly papers and the Internet. Also, "newspapers are becoming much more cost-conscious, or they appear to be so," he says.

Cost-cutting has forced newspaper editors to reserve less space for opinion pieces, including cartoons, he says. Instead of having a staff cartoonist, Benson says, newspapers depend on syndicated material, paying \$15 weekly for three or four cartoons rather than paying a full-time cartoonist's wages.

When four-time Reuben award-winner Wiley Miller quit as the editorial cartoonist for the San Francisco Examiner and created the comic strip, Non Sequitur, the paper never bothered to replace him, Miller says.

Having fewer jobs means competition will pick up, says Iowa City native Dan Perkins, who draws the weekly This Modern World as Tom Tomorrow. His hope is that the positions are not

filled simply by people who like to draw.

Signe Wilkinson, cartoonist for the Philadelphia Daily News and a 1992 Pulitzer Prize winner, says fewer papers and

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**FYI**

For more information on the political cartooning symposium, call the University of Iowa's School of Journalism and Mass Communication at (319) 335-5821.



jobs are affecting political cartooning but not killing it. "I don't think it is endangered. I think it's just in a quiet phase," she says.

Miller disagrees. "(Political cartooning is) not endangered. It's dead," says the Iowa City resident, an editorial cartoonist from 1977 to 1992. He accuses newspapers of not letting cartoonists, or even editorial writers, state a controversial opinion. He calls the process "the blandness of America."

"What good editorial cartoons do is to stir up debate," he says. Modern newspapers don't want to upset readers, though, he says. "It's safer, and it doesn't make the phone ring."

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Editors want "topical" humor similar to what is on the comics page, such as Clinton appearing in boxer shorts with hearts on them, Miller says.

In the past, Wilkinson says, debates centered on war and peace, Watergate and nuclear weapons. Modern issues tend to be "How big is too big for an SUV?"

People were saying editorial cartooning was a dying art 40 years ago until Pat Oliphant and Conrad came along in the early 1960s, Miller says, adding that there was a resurgence after Watergate, but since the 1980s, interest has waned.

Perkins says newspapers' willingness to let cartoonists do their job will determine editorial cartooning's future. "The question is whether they're going to let the cartoonist be as savage as the cartoonist needs to be," he says.

The future may, in fact, be online. Perkins says the Internet is a wild card in the game, adding that he has received e-mail from people all over the world regarding his work for the online magazine Salon.

Wilkinson points out that while newspapers are becoming apolitical, the Internet and World Wide Web are not. "We just have not adapted yet to the Web," she says. "Satire will never die; it will just change."

Political cartooning's situa-

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tion is indicative of a larger problem, says syndicated cartoonist Jules Feiffer. "It's probably been endangered for most of this century, except for several golden periods," including the struggle for civil rights, the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, says Feiffer, who has been cartooning since the Eisenhower administration.

"I don't think it's the political cartoon that's become endangered in this country. It's poli-

tics. It has become another form of entertainment," Feiffer says.

Jan Eliot, who does the comic strip Stone Soup, would seem to agree. "If political cartooning is endangered, it's because the people don't know enough about politics," she says.

Stone Soup's politics are limited. "I am a feminist, and I do write a feminist strip," but the strip centers on concerns of single mothers, such as schools. "I have occasionally made fun of the right wing when I really couldn't stand it anymore."

Even a comic strip can feel the squeeze on overtly political ideas. The strip's original name was Sister City, which caused problems. "The name was perceived as too ardently feminist in the South is what the syndicate told me," Eliot says.