



DOI 10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-146-156

EDN: LARRGB


UDC 316.77:070

Research article / Научная статья

## Literary studies of political caricature: a quantitative analysis of publications indexed in the Scopus

Mohsen Zarifian 

*Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University),  
10 Miklukho-Maklaya St, bldg 2, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation*

 [mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com](mailto:mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** The author reviews the past-to-present academic literature on cartoon studies (mainly editorial and political cartoons), that reflects the functional crisis of the cartoon associated with the development of the media space and new challenges. Some of the main trends, taxonomies, and approaches to date in political cartoon research are shown, and some of the weaknesses and strengths in the present field as well as aspects that are underdeveloped or have yet to be explored are highlighted. The articles in English published between 2017 and 2022 were reviewed to provide an understanding of the current state of the matter in various areas. The corpus was gathered by searching publications in international database Scopus. Each paper was classified based on its publication date, place of origin, subject of research, and frequency of citations. The quantitative approach employed enables the tracking of advancement in the field of cartoon studies over a given timeframe. Six distinct aspects pertinent to research in the field of political cartoons are suggested in a holistic approach, although this categorization is by no means all-inclusive and there is substantial overlap. The study of political cartoons during chosen period was more comprehensive and extensive than the study of editorial cartoons. Several proposals for further research in this field were put forward.

**Keywords:** editorial cartoons, caricature, mass communications, journalism

**Conflicts of interest.** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

**Article history:** submitted November 1, 2022; revised December 3, 2022; accepted December 17, 2022.

**For citation:** Zarifian, M. (2023). Literary studies of political caricature: A quantitative analysis of publications indexed in the Scopus. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 28(1), 146–156. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-146-156>

---

© Zarifian M., 2023



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

## Литературоведческие исследования политической карикатуры: количественный анализ публикаций, индексируемых в Scopus

М. Зарифиан 

*Российский университет дружбы народов,  
Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 10, корп. 2*

✉ mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com

**Аннотация.** Рассматривается академическая литература прошлого и настоящего по изучению карикатур (прежде всего, редакционных и политических), отражающая функциональный кризис жанра, связанный с развитием медиапространства и новыми вызовами. Показаны некоторые из основных тенденций, таксономий и подходов к исследованию политической карикатуры на сегодняшний день. Выделены слабые и сильные стороны в данной области, а также аспекты, которые недостаточно развиты или еще предстоит изучить. Проанализированы статьи на английском языке, опубликованные в период с 2017 по 2022 год, чтобы дать представление о текущем состоянии вопроса в различных областях. Корпус собран путем поиска публикаций в международной базе данных Scopus. Каждая статья классифицирована на основе даты публикации, места происхождения, предмета исследования и частоты цитирования. Используемый количественный подход позволил отследить прогресс в области изучения карикатуры за определенный период времени. Шесть различных аспектов, имеющих отношение к исследованиям в области политических карикатур, предлагаются в рамках целостного подхода, хотя эта классификация не является всеобъемлющей и имеет существенное дублирование. Обнаружено, что изучение политических карикатур за исследуемый период было более обширным, чем редакционных. Обозначены перспективы дальнейших исследований в этой области.

**Ключевые слова:** редакционные карикатуры, массовые коммуникации, журналистика

**Заявление о конфликте интересов.** Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**История статьи:** поступила в редакцию 1 ноября 2022 г.; отрецензирована 3 декабря 2022 г.; принята к публикации 17 декабря 2022 г.

**Для цитирования:** *Zarifian M. Literary studies of political caricature: a quantitative analysis of publications indexed in the Scopus // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2023. Т. 28. № 1. С. 146–156. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-1-146-156>*

### Introduction

The art of cartooning has been evolving as an art of visual protest since the Protestant Reformation in 1517 to the present time. They bridge the apparent gap between fact and fiction (Edwards, 1997). The ability of cartoons to undermine the legitimacy of absolute rulers by signifying desired meanings and being susceptible to interpretation has truly stood the test of time (Shikes, 1969, p. 10). Few forms of art have the potential to have such a long-term impact on society, and this popularity and influence on public opinion continue to this day, with print and online media increasingly using it to convey political commentary and criticism. Historic and recent examples visibly prove the relevance and the capability of the cartoon to spark controversy, which has made media researchers more

aware of the power and importance of political cartoons than in the past. Furthermore, cartoons' relevance in today's media landscape can be measured in relation to the efforts made to silence them (Danjoux, 2007, p. 245).

Political cartoons are initially simple to perceive, but their approach and context are complicated, making it difficult to analyze them. Reviewing a huge corpus of writing that spans fifty years of political cartoon studies is the purpose of the current study. Over the last few decades, the study of cartoons has expanded, but too frequently within distinct compartments where scholars have built new wheels due to a lack of adequate cross-disciplinary familiarity with other advancements. As a result, the discipline as a whole lacks the depth and coherence necessary to warrant insightful discussion. It is not clearly defined what discipline these studies fall under: media studies, cultural studies, humor studies, politics, or fine arts? The field is examined and mapped in order to serve as a reference for academics studying political cartoons because it transcends all of these disciplinary boundaries. The topic of cartoon studies is incredibly broad since cartooning is a form of visual and linguistic communication that has reached its pinnacle. Through a series of experiments, researchers might pursue various analyses utilizing a number of distinct pathways. By examining the unique elements of multi-modal discourse in cartoons, researchers of the cartoon genre have discussed how these elements were employed in cartoons and connected the traits with the situations in which they were applied.

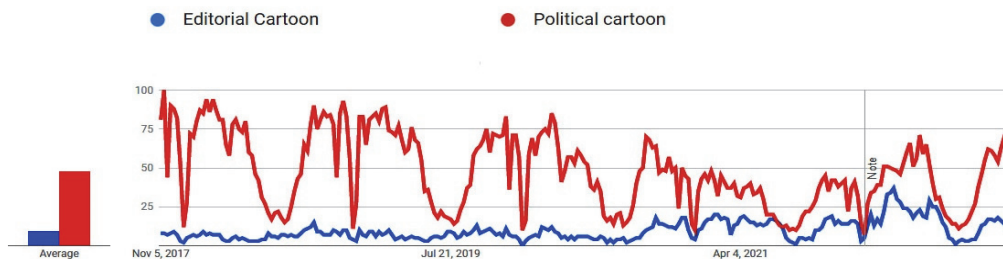
The field examined here is anchored in the newspaper-based tradition of the editorial cartoon, which emerged from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century, as well as its derivatives, which include “political cartoons” or “newspaper cartoons”.<sup>1</sup> The term “newspaper cartoon” is no longer relevant due to the development of digital communication and the shift of print media to digital forms such as social media, websites, and blogs. The proliferation of media technologies has negatively impacted the traditional role of editorial cartoons in fostering public debates, promoting civic discourse, and influencing how people see their surroundings (Leon, 2017). Contrarily, political cartooning is defined as visuals that convey political or social messages, with the authors utilizing various techniques to accomplish this objective. It is important to stress that this is neither a study of political satire nor a general review of cartoon art. Our focus is on work broadly derived from the above-mentioned traditions.

Despite the fact that there is a continually expanding corpus of research on political cartoons and that it has statistically surpassed the study of editorial cartoons in recent years (Figure 1), this field of study is theoretically fragmented, generally takes place within the scope of political communication research, and is widely acknowledged as lacking a framework from any one discipline (Diamond, 2002). There are numerous ways to conceptualize the political cartooning field, as well as numerous approaches to determining whether cartoons are art or a message. Frames vary depending on whether political cartoons are seen as explicable primarily in terms of form, perception, or socio-political function. It is expected that collecting the different sorts of approaches together will allow a more robust basis for mutually intelligible taxonomies of cartooning form and purpose to

---

<sup>1</sup> Newspaper cartooning refers to images defined by their medium of publication.

emerge. In this regard, in tandem with the decline of traditional print media, this article reveals that the studies of political cartoons in the past five years have had a significant difference compared to the study of editorial cartoons (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Search topics “Editorial Cartoon” and “Political cartoon” in Google Trends (between the 1st of December, 2017 and the 1st of December, 2022)

*Source:* Google trends data reflects searches people made on “Editorial Cartoon” and “Political cartoon”. Official site. Retrieved October 12, 2022, from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2017-11-01%202022-11-01&q=Editorial%20Cartoon,Political%20cartoon>

The main hypothesis of this paper is that the research literature on cartoon studies reflects the functional crisis of the cartoon associated with the development of the media space and new challenges.

## Method

This survey is not exhaustive, does not present new research, and only considers the corpus of works on cartoon studies in English. Thus, its goal is to provide an overview of Anglophone scholarship and to analyze academic literature on cartoons related to journalism and mass communication that has been written by foreign authors and published in Scopus. This study aims to map the field of political cartooning, provide direction for other scholars working in related areas, and facilitate better integration of results. The paper attempts to show with this survey some of the main trends, taxonomies, and approaches to date in political cartoon research and, at the same time, highlights some of the strengths in the present field as well as aspects that are underdeveloped or have yet to be explored.

In the current paper, we developed the definition of both “political cartoons” and “editorial cartoons” that were used in the measurement process. We applied the method of quantitative research. We included only academic publications indexed in the Scopus within the period from 2017 to 2022. The following research questions have been set to achieve the goal:

RQ1. How has the research literature on cartoon studies developed within the last five years?

RQ2. What is the position of political cartoon studies in comparison with editorial cartoons?

RQ3. What are the subject areas of study regarding political cartoons?

In order to create a list of words connected to cartoon studies, we first chose relevant terms from the articles' keyword section. Following that, we restricted our search to only areas connected to cartoon studies. That being “Social Scienc-

es”, “Arts and Humanities”, “Psychology”, “Engineering sciences”, “Computer Science” and “Medicine”.

A wide variety of academic disciplines will be examined in this survey, including language, literature, art, rhetoric, and history in the domain of the humanities; sociology, psychology, political science, area studies, communications, and media studies in the field of social sciences; as well as professions such as journalism, education, computer science, archival studies, and even nursing; and also humor studies as an interdisciplinary study. Afterward, we conducted a literature search in the scientific database and discovered a total of 91 records for “cartoon studies”, 121 for “Political Cartoons”, and 69 for “Editorial cartoons”. Thereafter, we identified duplicate papers and cleared the database. And as a result of there not being any duplicate papers at all, the cumulative corpus of publications was 132. Subsequently, we chose the pertinent papers and classified the data according to the time frame, the subject area, and the location of the researchers.

In the next step, we chose to emphasize a number of differentiating aspects in order to understand which strategy each researcher uses in their work. We opted to organize these elements into Table 1 based on the primary issues covered in the article, book, or monograph. The characteristics themselves were chosen based on the most commonly reported themes by the researchers. We assessed field development as well as works that had an influence on cartoon studies as a whole. Which is by no means exhaustive, six particular categories pertinent to studies in the field of political cartoons, with some duplication, are highlighted in Table 1 as follows: “Meta-studies of political cartoons”, “The properties of political cartoons”, “Political cartoons’ function as a cultural mirror”, “Political cartoons’ impact”, “Audience reception”, and “The political cartoon ecosystem”. This analysis has been done according to the classification proposed by Chen et al. (2017).

Table 1

**Proposed categorization for cartoon studies**

<b>Sub-field</b>	<b>Number of studies</b>	<b>%</b>
Meta-studies of political cartoons	16	12
The properties of political cartoons	48	36
Political cartoon as a cultural mirror	42	31.8
The impact of political cartoons	21	15.9
Audience reception	17	12.8
Political cartoon ecosystem	23	17.4
<b>Totals</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>125.9</b>

Source: compiled by the author.

## **Results and discussion**

The study of keywords in the search results reveals that the number of articles published with the keyword “Political Cartoons” was 41, while this number was only 10 for the keyword “Editorial cartoons” (Table 2). This finding supports our hypothesis that the study of political cartoons is more extensive than the study of editorial cartoons.

Figure 2 compares the articles published in the Scopus database exclusively with the keyword “Political Cartoons” and also exclusively with the keyword

“Editorial Cartoons”. The findings of this study demonstrate that during this time span, political cartoons have been the dominant subject of investigation.

Table 2

The number of keywords related to cartoon studies used in research from 2017 to 2022 on Scopus

<b>Political Cartoons (41)</b>	Cartoons (28)
Political Cartoon (25)	Art (16)
Caricature (15)	Human (15)
COVID-19 (12)	Humans (13)
Cartoon (11)	Metaphor (12)
<b>Editorial Cartoons (10)</b>	Propaganda (11)

Source: compiled by the author.

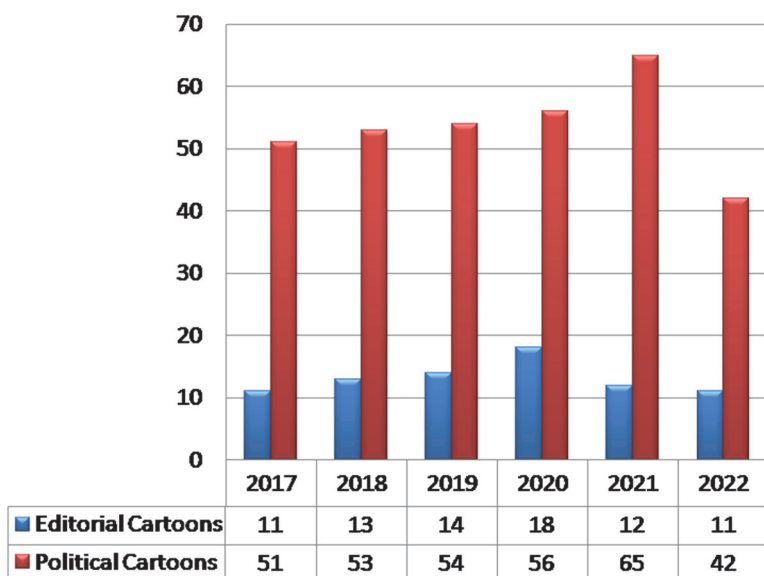


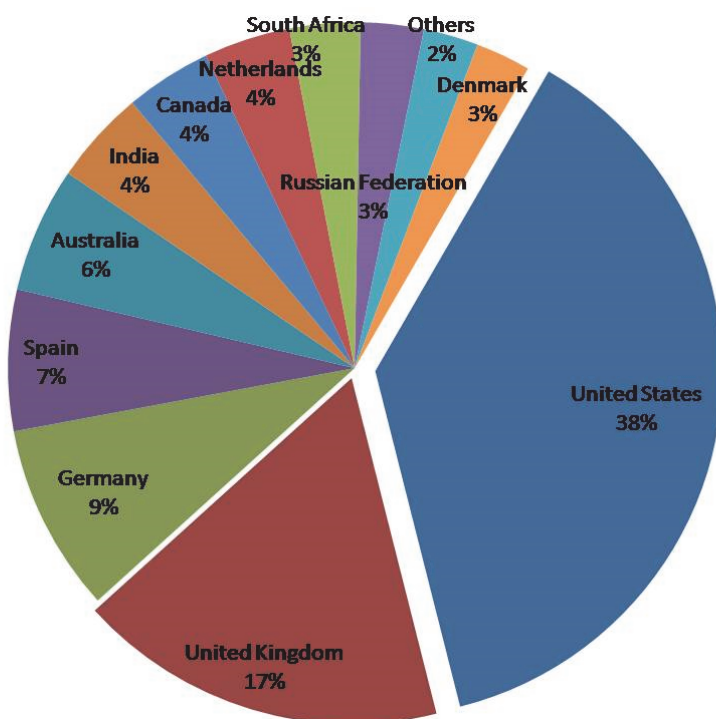
Figure 2. Number of articles on published in Scopus databases

Source: compiled by the author.

The country of origin factor for articles on cartoon studies indexed in Scopus shows that most research comes from academic institutions in the USA (38%). The study also demonstrates that 17% of the papers on cartoon studies were written by British scholars (Figure 3). Political cartoons are still widely popular in the United States and are the subject of more scholarly study than any other country in the world, which explains well the country’s high citation index, despite the fact that this genre is losing its centrality and the influential role it once had. The experience the USA has in the media market, the well-established media institutions, and the high indexes of professional journalism such as freedom of expression make other scholars cite USA articles more frequently.

Nevertheless, many scholars in the US believe that a reduction in political cartoon impact is intrinsically related to the decline of print media and dwindling career possibilities (Lamb, 2004, p. 220). Around 2000 editorial cartoonists were

employed by daily newspapers in the United States around the beginning of the 20th century. By the turn of the twenty-first century, just 85 remained.<sup>2</sup> Over the past ten years, the downward trend has intensified, and just 30 editorial cartoonists are currently employed full-time by the roughly 1300 daily newspapers in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Economic factors and editorial views about the role of editorial cartoons have conspired to reduce the importance of political cartoonists in the United States' printed media. When readership declines, advertising income also decreases, which reduces the amount of money available for wages. Newspaper editors who don't value political cartoons always eliminate the full-time cartoonist post and turn to syndicated cartoonists to cut costs (Lamb, 2004, p. 225).



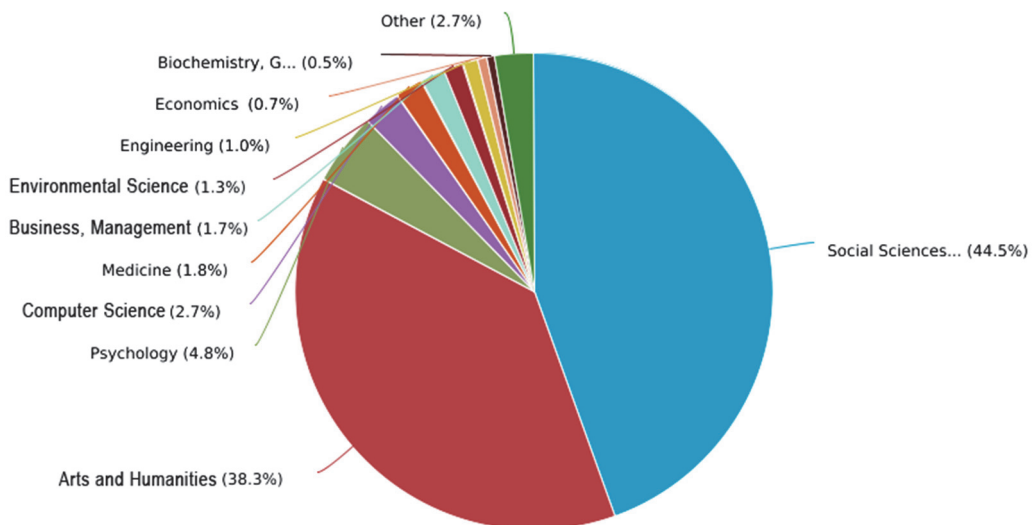
**Figure 3.** The country of articles' origin on cartoon studies in Scopus citation database

Source: compiled by the author.

Figure 4 shows that the most studies are in the field of “Social science” (44.5%). Our findings suggests that, whilst considerable research exists on the subject of cartoons, 38% focus has been afforded towards the artistic, rhetorical and metaphoric devices employed by editorial cartoonists in creating layered narratives.

<sup>2</sup> Plante, B. (2004, December 15). What publishers think about editorial cartoons. *Nieman Reports*. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from <https://niemanreports.org/articles/what-publishers-think-about-editorial-cartoons/>

<sup>3</sup> Rall, T. (2015, January 21). Editors are killing US political cartooning. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/01/21/commentary/world-commentary/editors-killing-u-s-political-cartooning/#>



**Figure 4.** Research areas on cartoon studies in the Scopus citation database

Source: compiled by the author.

132 articles were studied while conducting a literature review. The technique, methods, and theories for political cartoon study are the subject of some of the research. Several articles study formal and practical aspects of the nature and function of political cartoons. Political cartoons must effectively combine both form and function to function, hence these two are invariably related in such research. The majority of research has focused on political cartoons as cultural mirrors and emphasized the numerous ways that they might represent people, audiences, or society at large. Many researchers stress cartoons' socially and politically powerful impact, but because of their polysemous nature and susceptibility to interpretation, it is typically difficult to quantify these impacts. Another series of studies has concentrated on the interpretational process that takes place when audiences react to cartoons. Another body of research focuses on the environment that surrounds cartoonists and the industry as well as anticipated historical turning points. Their themes include various issues that cartoonists are dealing with, including constraints, job losses due to the decline of the industry, and the loss of the cartoon's influence. Cartoonists make daily political and ethical decisions in the course of their work, and they do so under various kinds of legal, economic, and moral restraint.

According to the classification suggested by K.-W. Chen, R. Phiddian, and R. Stewart (2017), in a holistic approach, six specific aspects relevant to research in the field of political cartoons are emphasized here; however, they are by no means all-inclusive, and there is considerable overlap. While this essay makes no claims that this categorization is exhaustive and also may not accurately reflect all current academic trends, it is sufficiently thorough to provide a summary of the relevant academic studies with a high degree of probable validity.

The proposed categorization has been presented in Table 1. Since many studies are included in more than one sub-field, the sum of the percentages is higher than 100%. Instead of claiming statistical accuracy, the statistics offer a heuristic tool



to present a field overview. Other studies' percentage findings could differ significantly since categorization is fundamentally interpretative and subjective. Therefore, quantification is more informative than conclusive.

It should be noted that, since much of the research taken into consideration overlaps, this article does not assert that these categories serve as strict boundaries. Since they constantly involve interpretative judgment, classifications of this type can only be justified on exploratory principles, but they can nevertheless serve as a valuable framework for discussion among future scholars.

### **Conclusion**

This is not the first study to attempt to map the scope of research on political cartoons across disciplines and impose some order on the topic. As an important instance, John Lent's vast multi-volume bibliographies of writing linked to all types of comic art (2003, 2004, 2006) contain sections for “political cartoons” and “caricature”, organized by country; and for political cartooning in the US, smaller categories such as “generic studies”, “historical elements”, “portrayals”, “legal issues”, “professional factors”, and specific artists. Similarly, M. Rhode and J. Bullough's (2016) online Comics Research Bibliography, 1996–2009, offers a considerable number of entries in its lists of resources for “editorial cartoons” and “caricature”. These are of minimal practical value to a new scholar because there is no attempt to distinguish academic research from journalistic works, nor is there any attempt to suggest substance or synthesize the studies listed. P. Somers (1998) presents a more specialized reference book for editorial caricature and cartooning. This book goes beyond just collecting cartoon materials and aims to criticize and synthesize some previous studies. However, it focuses more on US political cartooning and its history than the entire industry. Furthermore, as can be deduced from their publication dates, all of these resources for scholars are now rather old.

Scholars of political cartoons require more dedicated journals and platforms to discuss topics, develop methodology, and exchange information in order to advance their field of study. Should this be a call for more grounding in comic studies or in some other field specifically? Or should it be to establish itself as a distinct field? Finding a well-known name may be a good starting point to build a rallying flag that a field might rally around, similar to what comic studies have done currently. But what is the best title for the study of political cartooning? Some generally agreed-upon definitions of fundamental concepts are also crucial for the field's development in order to make sure that when researchers engage in cross-discipline conversation, they are not communicating in a different language. These notions should be considered during the study of the earlier research.

The papers in our survey were prepared by scholars from a variety of scholarly backgrounds. Therefore, this variety is the first thing to note. The resulting diversity of approaches, foci, and topics can be considered both strength and a weakness for the field, strength due to the fact that all of these disciplinary perspectives have something to contribute to the field's advancement. On the other hand, this diversity is a big weakness because it can be concluded that none of these disciplines place a high priority on the study of cartoon.

One gets the impression that studies of cartoons are frequently just passing flings done to test or refute a hypothesis at the time or because cartoons occasionally gain popularity, as in the case of the Danish cartoon controversy. But in either scenario, the subject of cartoons is quickly forgotten.

Examining the list of authors shows that there are numerous authors with only one article. This finding demonstrates that the vast majority of authors only study political cartoons for a short period of time. Despite the excellence of some one-off articles, most of the more profound work is produced by a small number of scholars who have pondered the cartoon for years. This lack of long-term engagement, combined with the overly fragmented nature of the field, split among many disciplines, makes it difficult to find and develop past and even current research.

Research on audience reception and studies employing conceptual metaphor theories have both gained a considerable theoretical foundation. Even these, however, demonstrate the flaw of neglecting to engage in dialogue with and expand on earlier research. It becomes challenging to evaluate the field as a whole and determine which areas are well developed and which are not. In order to gain coherence, however, the topic requires a number of further monograph-length studies.

To summarize the main point of this paper, in today's pluralized media landscape and the challenges confronting cartoonists in the new media space, the process in which print media struggle with a steep decline in sales and advertising incomes, rising costs, shrinking readership, and an influx of social media, the future of the traditional editorial model of cartoons in newspapers may not be certain, but the future of the political cartoon in digital media is certain.

## References

- Chen, K-W., Phiddian, R., & Stewart, R. (2017). Towards a discipline of political cartoon studies: Mapping the field. In J. Milner Davis (Ed.), *Satire and Politics: The Interplay of Heritage and Practice* (pp. 125–162). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56774-7\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56774-7_5)
- Danjoux, I. (2007). Reconsidering the decline of the editorial cartoon. *Political Science and Politics*, 40(2), 245–248. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096507070370>
- Diamond, M. (2002). No laughing matter: Post-September 11 political cartoons in Arab/Muslim newspapers. *Political Communication*, 19(2), 251–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600252907470>
- Edwards, J.L. (1997). *Political cartoons in the 1988 presidential campaign: Image, metaphor, and narrative*. London: Routledge.
- Lamb, C. (2004). *Drawn to extremes: The use and abuse of editorial cartoons*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lent, J.A. (2003). *Comic art of Europe through 2000: An international bibliography. Volumes I, II. Bibliographies and indexes in popular culture*. Westport, CT, London: Praeger.
- Lent, J.A. (2004). *Comic art in Africa, Asia, Australia, and Latin America through 2000: An international bibliography*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Lent, J.A. (2006). *Comic books and comic strips in the United States through 2005: An international bibliography*. Westport, CT, London: Praeger.
- Leon, L. (2017). The evolution of political cartooning in the New Media Age: Cases from Australia, the USA and the UK. In J. Milner Davis (Ed.), *Satire and Politics:*

- The Interplay of Heritage and Practice. Palgrave Studies in Comedy* (pp. 163–191). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rhode, M., & Bullough, J. (2016). Comics research bibliography: Topical bibliographies (1996–2009). *Transatlantica*. <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.4939>
- Shikes, R.E. (1969). *The indignant eye: The artist as social critic in prints and drawings from the fifteenth century to Picasso*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Somers, P. (1998). *Editorial cartooning and caricature: A reference guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- The Herb Block Foundation. (2011). *The golden age for editorial cartoonists at the nation's newspapers is over*. Retrieved December 12, 2022, from [https://www.herbblockfoundation.org/sites/default/files/hbf2011whitepaper\\_fl.pdf](https://www.herbblockfoundation.org/sites/default/files/hbf2011whitepaper_fl.pdf)

**Bio note:**

*Mohsen Zarifian*, PhD student, Department of Mass Communication, Philological Faculty, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), 10 Miklukho-Maklaya St, bldg 2, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0001-7363-0263. E-mail: [mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com](mailto:mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com)

**Сведения об авторе:**

*Зарифиан Мохсен*, аспирант, кафедра массовых коммуникаций, филологический факультет, Российский университет дружбы народов, Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 10, корп. 2. ORCID: 0000-0001-7363-0263. E-mail: [mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com](mailto:mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com)