

Political humour is a powerful tool

Conversation with Ian Prince*

Can you make fun of politics?

In Britain, it is almost a national duty to make fun of politics, there has been a tradition of the political cartoons for adults for centuries. This tradition goes back many hundreds of years to the newspapers which started to develop in London in the 1700s alongside the coffee houses. Many, many years before *Starbucks* came to London, the coffee houses in London in the 1700s were places where people would meet, debate, drink coffee, talk politics and read newspapers. Political cartoons in this country go back to that time, and they have had a very strong presence in the national newspapers ever since. I think this is part of the British psyche: a desire to undermine authority with humour is something that comes very naturally to British people. There are lots of satirical cartoons in the newspapers for adults, based on today's politics which do two things: One, they make fun of the politics of the day, two, some of them have a strong social message. Politics and humour can be different sides, almost, of the same coin. Any weekly comedy or discussion programme in the UK, like in many other countries, will include jokes about the politics of that week. That's a very strong tradition: people expect it, and making jokes about politics is something to be good at.

What about humour in children's news programmes?

Newsround must be seen to be impartial – so this limits the extent to which we can mix humour and news. The message to get over to children has to be very clear, because if one uses humour in that situation it might confuse the message. If we from *Newsround* are seen to be making jokes about the situation in Iraq, my concern would be that the message children get from that would be undermining the seriousness of the situation. Adults can laugh at political humour because they have more years of experience, and they understand that it's a way of analysing politics. Very occasionally when we do political stories, if there is a way of having fun and it's appropriate, then we would use humour. One of our election programmes had cartoon figures of political leaders to add some fun. And that was to promote an interest in politics, rather than undermine our message. So, we don't mix humour and politics in *Newsround* because we're doing our best to explain the politics in a clear way, and news programmes in the UK are very concerned with being unbiased. We have to be careful that the humour would not be seen to be making us biased in favour of a story or against the story. So, what we'd do is we'd present the facts to children and let them make up their own minds. We like to use humour in *Newsround*,

while we might start the programme with a serious story, if there's an opportunity to have a funny story, then we will do it to give some balance to the programme so it is not all serious. Or, if there's an opportunity to make some jokes in a script, then we will do it. But they tend to be what we would call "light stories." And they would be naturally humorous anyway. If we have an animal story, you can make jokes about that. If you have a story about an underwater wedding, for example, then that's naturally funny. So, you can put jokey words in the script in a way that's suitable for children. But we're not then changing the nature of the story.

Are there limits on humorous press coverage?

I think if we were to do a story about Saddam Hussein and his trial, and we put lots of jokes in it, it would be considered bad taste. In *Newsround*, we reported on the Mohammed caricatures in the Danish press and the controversy in winter 2005, and we did not show the cartoons. This was a very difficult decision because there are two competing interests here. On the one hand here's the interest of not offending people, and to show a representation of the prophet Mohammed is instant offence to any Muslim, and on the other hand there is the right of free speech. To show an image which you shouldn't do in Islam and making

“I think that the mocking of the prophet Mohammed was quite insulting to Moslems but I think they took it a bit too far. They shouldn’t start burning things and threaten to kill people over a newspaper comic!”

“my letter is about the cartoon strip about muhammad. i am a muslim myself and think this appalling, it is an insult to our PROPHET and our RELIGION. How would britain feel if there were bombs on britain and some other country would draw a cartoon showing jesus with his cross and him having a bomb above his head. someone should sort this out. it is an outrage and all the muslims in this world should be very upset and definately ANGRY!”

“I think that freedom of speech is right but people should not go around in suicide bomber suits because it offends people including the victims families.”

“I think they shouldn’t make cartoons that will make people upset because it just causes arguments and fights”

Source: BBC Newsround home page 8.2.2006: Should the cartoons have been published? (Children’s reactions to Mohammed caricatures published in the Danish press)

statements which satirise or make fun of the religion is doubly offensive. So, we did the story, and we reported on the controversy and the background, but we chose not to show the cartoons because we knew that would be extremely offensive to the Muslim population.

So we explained why the cartoons were offensive to Muslim people, but we did it in a way that explained the two sides of the argument, because there’s also the free speech argument. But I suppose free speech is always tempered with understanding sensibilities.

Another area where adult humour differs from children’s humour is that the type of humour that sets out to shock people. The cartoons that I’ve seen, for example the prophet with the bomb on his head, were satirical

cartoons. Although they’re cartoons, they were certainly not suitable for children in their drawings, or in their message. So, I don’t think children would have found those cartoons funny. Most children in this country would probably not have seen the cartoons because they were not published here. Responses of children on our websites were coming in after we had done an explanation as to why they were offensive.

Children have a very strong sense of what’s right and what’s wrong. They have a strong sense of fair-play, and I think children were questioning why they had been published in the first place if people knew already that they would be very insulting to many people? So the comments from kids were interesting because they were taking up both sides of the argument,

which I think is great, because the important thing for children to understand about this is why there was a controversy, and what the issues surrounding the controversy are.

To conclude, in my opinion politics and humour is something people grow into – depending on their level of understanding. ■

* A résumé of a conversation with Ian Prince, editor of *Newsround* on BBC1 Television, the children’s news programme of the British Broadcasting Corporation, London, United Kingdom.