Interview with Clay Bennett

by
Jimmy Margulies,
The Record

Clay Bennett is the editorial cartoonist for the *Christian Science Monitor*, based in Boston. Bennett joined the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1998 and produces five cartoons a week, which are nationally syndicated by the Christian Science Monitor News Service. Previously, he was the editorial cartoonist for the *St. Petersburg Times* from 1981–1994. He began his career as a staff artist for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and the *Fayetteville Times* after graduating from the University of North Alabama in 1980 with degrees in Art and History.

The recipient of many of the major awards in his field, Bennett won the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning in 2002, the Overseas Press Club Award in 2005, the Fischetti Editorial Cartoon Competition in 2001 and 2005, the National Headliner Award in 1999, 2000, and 2004, the Sigma Delta Chi Award from the Society of Professional Journalists in 2001, the Scripps Howard Foundation Award in 2002, and was named *Editor and Publisher's* Editorial Cartoonist of the Year in 2001.

He was one of the very first editorial cartoonists to take advantage of digital technology to create his editorial cartoons, and this has become very much a trademark look for his work. As such, he is able to offer clients both color and black and white versions of each day's drawing.

As president of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists during the 2005–2006 period, Bennett was a particularly active and vocal spokesperson for both the organization and the field of editorial cartooning in general. Bennett's term as president took place during a particularly tumultuous year for editorial cartooning. Confronted by several job losses for editorial cartoonists at large newspapers, and the controversy over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, Bennett was called upon repeatedly by various media outlets to frame a response to these issues.

Jimmy Margulies is the editorial cartoonist for the *Record* (New Jersey), and his work is syndicated by King Features. His book, *Hitting Below the Beltway: The Best of Margulies*, was published by Pelican Publishing Company in 1998. He has won several major awards for his editorial cartoons.

Q-Jimmy Margulies: *Any discussion of the state of editorial cartooning has to confront the loss of jobs in our profession. Most of the job losses are described as economic decisions by the newspaper deciding to let their cartoonist go. But are there sometimes other factors that play a role, too? Such as personality clashes, or philosophical differences?*

A-Clay Bennett: Recently, the decline in our ranks has been just a part of a larger and disturbing trend in print journalism. The layoffs of Mike Ramirez at the *Los Angeles Times*, Kevin Kallaugher at the *Baltimore Sun*, and Tim Menees at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* were a result of this trend and a testament to the fact that newspapers are now ruled more by economic theory than public service.

The bulk of the positions lost over the past 30 years, however, has been a result of the virtual extinction of two-newspaper towns in America. Three decades ago, almost every major city in this country had two daily papers competing for readers. Unfortunately, that's now the exception and not the rule. It's simple math: fewer papers = fewer jobs for cartoonists.

The real problem for journalism in general, and editorial cartoonists in particular, is the lasting effect that this attrition has had on the news industry. Our problem now is not the newspapers that were lost, but the ones that remain. No longer engaged in a competition for readers, a newspaper loses the ambition and aggressiveness that rivalry inspires. Without a cross-town rival, the features that once made the paper unique, and the journalists whose work most distinguished the publication from its competitor become expendable. Of course, the journalists who are the most expensive are the most expendable in the eyes of an accountant. Editorial cartoonists, who often fall into this category, also suffer from the fact that their work is usually controversial. Controversy, which in a competitive environment is seen as a virtue, is viewed as a vice to a newspaper without a rival.

Having cornered the local print market, newspapers move to compete with the only journalistic rival they have left: television news. This usually translates into a paper becoming more like TV news with less comprehensive coverage, less investigative journalism, and (unfortunately for editorial cartoonists) an aversion to opinion-based journalism. It's no accident that editorial cartoons have never been fully embraced when attempted on TV, so it's really no wonder that they become anathema to a newspaper that now sees television as its main competition.

Reasons for dismissing a cartoonist are not always due to the elimination of the position or economic cutbacks at the newspaper. Many times a dismissal might be due to personality conflicts. Sometimes it might be for philosophical differences. Still other times (as with my termination at the *St. Petersburg Times*), it might be a combination of the two. One thing's for sure though, when you express your opinion as openly and unambiguously as an editorial cartoonist does, you will alienate some people and you will offend others. All you can hope for is that none of them become your

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Figure 1



Jimmy Margulies © 2006 *The Record*, New Jersey.

boss. If they do, no lofty pledges to the sanctity of free expression, or high-minded endorsements to the virtue of an open political debate will keep your head from being lopped off the first chance they get.

Q-JM: *Usually the number of cartoonists employed on newspapers has been described as between 80 and 90. As AAEC president, you did a count recently. What number are you using as a result?*

A-CB: This census was an attempt to get a hard number for the full-time editorial cartoonists working on staff at U.S. newspapers. The poll was unscientific in nature and came in at about 100. That being said, I think the number is actually smaller. Many of the artists on the list have duties other than cartooning in their job descriptions and therefore don't really qualify under the criteria of the count. Therefore, when asked, I still put the number of full-timers between 80 and 90.

This brings us to the other question that this survey begs: How many full-time editorial cartoonists were employed 30 years ago? That's even a harder number to come up with. What I do know from my own recollection though, is that when I got into this business in 1980, there were a lot more medium-sized markets that employed cartoonists full-time, and the larger markets usually had two.

These estimations lead us to conclude that staff jobs have been cut by at least half in the last three decades, but the decline may actually be more severe than that.

Q-JM: *When you did the cartoonist census, you used certain criteria to judge whether a cartoonist would be counted. Why did you decide that only those who do nothing but draw cartoons would make the cut? Given the paucity of jobs, shouldn't someone who does five cartoons a week, plus other art also be counted?*

A-CB: The count was motivated by the dismissal of several of our colleagues. In these particular cases, the newspapers not only terminated the cartoonists, but eliminated their positions entirely. As discouraging as it is to see one of our friends lose a job, it's really distressing to hear that the job itself has been lost.

The fact that the census was a count of those with full-time positions, and not those who produced a full-time quota of work, was certainly not a value judgment of anyone. This was really more of a barometer of the newspaper industry (and its willingness to employ one of us full-time) than it was a head count of cartoonists working today.

Q-JM: *There are a number of cartoonists now who are not working on newspapers, but do produce cartoons regularly, and have a following through syndication, the Internet, etc. Can't they also be considered as equals to those of us that do work for a newspaper?*

A-CB: I do consider them equals. I would never judge anyone, in any profession, by the size of their paycheck or the status of their employment. As I mentioned before, the census was more to gauge the industry's support of our profession than it was to judge the validity of a cartoonist.

As one who's been on both sides of this census (as a full-time cartoonist for two different newspapers, and as a freelancer for the three years between those gigs) I understand all too well how incredibly difficult it is to make a living when you're going it alone. As valuable as those three years were in my own professional development, I know from my own experience that the job is a lot easier when you have no concerns other than cartooning.

I firmly believe, despite the decline in full-time positions, that the quality of the editorial cartoons being produced today is better than ever. I also believe that editorial cartooning will survive this current decline. In the long run we attract more readers to a newspaper than we alienate, and we make more money for the industry than it costs to employ us. Bean counters may not care about what's good for journalism, but they do care about what's good for business. Editorial cartoonists are good for both, and that fact will ultimately be our salvation.

Q-JM: *People in our business always speak of the virtue of drawing local cartoons. It has been suggested that one way to make a job at a paper more secure is by doing a steady amount of local work, because that is something that cannot be obtained from a syndicate. Do you see that there is more local work being done in response to the current climate?*

A-CB: I do see more local cartoons being drawn in an attempt to validate staff cartooning positions. While I firmly believe that it's an important duty of a staff cartoonist to draw on local and state issues, we shouldn't kid ourselves into thinking that drawing more local cartoons will necessarily increase our job security. My own history has shown me that quite the opposite can be true.

Addressing local issues can actually be the source of more friction between a cartoonist and a publisher. After all, a newspaper is a business and a driving economic force in its community. As such, it benefits directly from the decisions being made in city halls and county commissions. When you start upsetting

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Figure 2



Clay Bennett, © 2001 *The Christian Science Monitor.*

those apple carts, it's often the newspaper's apples you're upsetting. Although the business interests of a newspaper shouldn't affect its news coverage or editorial policies, they usually do. So drawing local cartoons as a way of enhancing your job security may be a trade off. You may gain some security from giving your paper something they can't get elsewhere, but you may lose some by stepping on your publisher's toes more directly.

Our profession has always defined the value of having a cartoonist on staff with the same two-word mantra—local cartoons. I don't mean to discount the importance of cartooning on local issues, but there's a lot more to our job description and our job security than that. It's a staff cartoonist's duty to draw local cartoons, but only when they're called for. If you're passing over state, national, or international issues that deserve comment in deference to a local story that deserves none, then you're really not doing your job as a cartoonist. If you're not doing your job, you sure aren't enhancing your job security.

The value of having a cartoonist on staff is not limited to the production of local cartoons. It's much deeper than that. Like any regular feature in a newspaper, an editorial cartoon becomes a part of a reader's daily routine, a part of their life. A reader's commitment to you doesn't hinge on the subject matter of the cartoons you draw, but on the relationship you develop. They may love you or they may hate you, but either way, you're THEIR cartoonist.

Certainly, a staff cartoonist can address local issues and give the newspaper something it can't buy from a syndicate, but that same cartoonist can draw on any issue and give the readers something they can't get elsewhere—work from THEIR cartoonist.

Q-JM: *Second to job losses in our field, the controversy over the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed has been the biggest contemporary issue concerning our profession. Do you think papers were right to largely refuse to publish those cartoons? And what does this experience have to say about the freedom of expression to depict controversial subject matter?*

A-CB: We should all feel free to draw Muhammad, Jesus, Moses, Buddha, or any other sacred prophet without fear of intimidation or reprisal. No secular journalist should be obliged to follow the tenets of any religious law. If we as visual artists have to respect Islam's ban on idolatry, then our work is no more secure than the ancient Buddha statues of Bamiyan that now lie in rubble in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, any defense of the Muhammad drawings is muddied by the motives of the newspaper that reproduced them. Certainly, Denmark's *Jyllands-Posten* had the right to publish the cartoons. But all rights come with responsibilities, and the story that emerged about the drawings, the commission of the cartoons, and their eventual publishing seems to establish that the newspaper was more than willing to exercise their rights without much consideration of their responsibilities. Added to that *Jyllands-Posten's* earlier refusal to publish cartoons satirizing the resurrection of Christ, and their motivation and cultural sensitivity is cast even further into doubt.

Considering the controversy that ensued, and the enormity of the protest over the drawings, many journalists saw it as their duty to publish the cartoons in an attempt to better inform their readers. Others thought the story could be reported fully by simply including a description of the drawings. I have no problem with either decision. I do, however, have a problem with the condemnation of anyone who chose not to publish them. The press has covered many stories where a racist cartoon in the workplace might have led to someone's dismissal, or an indecent painting or photograph in a museum might have led to protests. Those stories, more often than not, were reported without publishing the controversial artwork. If the public was not ill-served by having those images excluded from the coverage, then perhaps they weren't ill-served in the case of the Muhammad cartoons either.

The freedom to address controversial subject matter as a cartoonist probably has been impacted by the fallout from the Muhammad drawings. Freedom of expression and the right of free speech is one of the most sacred and protected liberties in our democratic society. Most newspapers and magazines, however, are not democracies. Like most businesses, they are dictatorships. Some may be more benevolent dictatorships than others, but, make no bones about it, the freedom extended to those who work for a newspaper are only as liberal as their particular dictator permits. If the government tries to restrict free speech, it's unconstitutional. If a newspaper does it, it's standard operating procedure.

An editorial cartoonist on the staff of a newspaper is always on a leash. How taut that leash is depends entirely on who controls it, and where you, as a cartoonist, may want to stray.

Q-JM: *Over the last 10 years, the Internet has become a major factor in our profession. Are more cartoonists going to be able to make a living off the web as newspaper jobs grow scarcer? And as color cartoons become more common, are*

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Figure 3



Clay Bennett, © 2006 *The Christian Science Monitor.*

black and white drawings becoming a thing of the past, or can cartoonists continue to thrive without color?

A-CB: The Internet has had a huge impact on our profession. Its most profound impact on editorial cartoonists has probably been in the delivery of our work. A drawing that used to take several days to deliver by snail mail, or a day (and no small expense) by FedEx, now arrives immediately, inexpensively, and digitally perfect via email or an FTP site. In a profession that depends on the timeliness of their product's arrival, this is no small accomplishment. The Internet's economic and creative impact on our profession, however, has been far less profound.

Economically, the web has been a wash for most of us. We might get a few more reprints and certainly more readers from our exposure on the web, but it hasn't yet become a marketplace that can provide many of us with a living wage.

Creatively, the Internet has proven to be less than revolutionary, too. There are a few among us who get it: cartoonists who understand that you have to exploit the features that are unique to this platform (sound and movement), to make an impact on the web. In fact, many of these cartoonists have abandoned print journalism entirely, staking their claim in the digital frontier with animated editorial cartoons. But for most of us, static cartoons are still the industry standard, and the Internet has served as little more than an impetus to add some color to our work.

Although color editorial cartoons may not add much value to the work on the World Wide Web, it has been a positive development for the art form in general. But it's a breakthrough that seems to be limited to online publishing. In newsprint, editorial cartooning is still almost exclusively black and white.

With time, technology, and a desire from either a cartoonist or an editor, that will surely change. Increasingly, color is invading the editorial page. Some in our profession might lament the end of the black and white era of editorial cartooning, but they really shouldn't. Since moving totally to color cartooning over eight years ago, I have come to realize it actually makes the job easier. Color is just one more tool you can use to build a cartoon. It broadens your vocabulary as a visual communicator. Color might be nothing more than window dressing on most days, but on some days, it can make the cartoon. In fact, with some cartoons, the color is absolutely essential to its success.

Adaptation is the key to the survival of any species. We as cartoonists are no difference. Whether it's the use of color on the editorial page, or the use of sound and motion on the Internet, we must adapt to the environment in which we currently exist or suffer the same unenviable fate of every species that's failed to do so.

Q-JM: *The vast majority of cartoonists are White males. Why are there so few women in the business? Is it because they face additional obstacles to entry into the field, or is it just that few women seek to become editorial cartoonists?*

A-CB: Certainly, women are woefully underrepresented in the field of editorial cartooning. But the same is true in all cartooning.

The dearth of women in this field is probably due to a variety of factors. I'm sure institutional sexism within newsrooms kept women from serving as editorial cartoonists, just as it kept female reporters from covering anything other than garden parties and social events. But those barriers are long gone in our business, and as we look around an industry that has women serving at every level, it no longer explains why we can still count only a handful of women among the ranks of editorial cartoonists.

Perhaps the fact that there are so few women in cartooning is due to how males and females are conditioned from birth, how we're socialized to take on not only different gender roles, but different character traits. The traits that are encouraged in boys are more competitive, rebellious, and assertive in nature, while the traits fostered in young girls are more nurturing, compassionate, and humane. Not all men or women fit neatly into these socialized roles, but the training and pressures to conform to them is undeniable.

Even this kind of rigid gender-based socialization, though, is the product of a passed time. Hopefully, as the roles, character traits, and expectations we instill in our kids change, so will the demographics of the cartooning community. We see it already as more and more women pursue cartooning as a career. As younger women are encouraged to enter the field by these role models (and then become role models themselves to a new generation of young women), I fully expect cartoonists as a group will better reflect society in general.

Clay Bennett's cartoons can been seen daily at the *Christian Science Monitor's* web site, www.csmonitor.com.

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