Objects(s): Giles Cartoon
Object Number(s): STMEA:A.1603
Researcher details: Olivia Butler, Volunteer

Many of us are familiar with cartoons, whether on screen or in magazines, but what can they tell us about how different news and ideas spread in the past?

To help us delve deeper into this question, we have a cartoon in the collection that depicts a comical scene of rural life. Donated to the museum in 1967, the black and white cartoon, an original prepared for the printer, depicts a large group of men and women in evening dress, with the men wearing dinner jackets and black tie. One man, dressed in tweeds and holding a pint, turns to his wife who also wears country clothes and says, “Beats me how some of these town pubs pay, Emily – more waiters than customers.”

The changing world of cartoons

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, cartoons have been around for a long time, but it was in the 1840s that they began to take on the form we recognise today as parodies using caricature, satire and humour. Graphic satire has featured in British visual culture since the 18th century. Artists such as Hogarth produced prints to depict different scenes of British society as he saw them, which often had political or moral undertones (Fig. 1).

Figure 1

The Polling (Four Prints of an Election, plate 3)

This print, one of a series of four, shows a polling booth on election day. Representatives of the political party can be seen taking as many people as they possibly can to the polls to ensure votes – some are even shown carrying a corpse! Hogarth intended this to show the desperation (and corruption) of some politicians of his time.

---

Humour became a more prominent feature in these engravings in the mid-19th century, which made cartoons closer to what we recognise today. They were often used to convey commentary and opinion to an audience—whether that be about current political issues or about the social conditions and phenomena of the time. One magazine particularly famous for its satirical cartoons was Punch magazine, first published in 1841, which soon became a household name synonymous with cartoons that commented on British life and politics. This was a major and popular way that people of the nineteenth century would find out about and understand the state of British politics at the time, and some of the debates surrounding it—making the cartoon a powerful way of communicating information and opinion.

The changing technology surrounding printing in the early 1800s allowed more cartoons to be printed and a magazine to be created which was circulated to more people via the railways. As printing technology continued to progress, cartoons were able to communicate the observations, ideas and opinions of their creators to wider and wider audiences and became a regular feature of newspapers and magazines even to this day.

Carl Giles

The cartoon was made by “GILES”, which probably refers to satirical cartoonist Carl Giles, who was active from around 1943 to 1991 and had close connections to the East Anglian region. Born in 1916 as the grandson of a Norfolk farmer, Giles grew up regularly visiting East Anglia in his childhood and, along with some spells spent living in London, spent the majority of his illustrious career living and working in Ipswich until his death in 1995. Giles was famed for ‘social satire’ and used his cartoons to make comical observations about the social and cultural conditions of the time. His work tended to avoid politics and instead created a comical snapshot of the world around him, particularly in capturing the rural life he’d grown up around (as shown in this cartoon).

---

As he insisted on working from his studio in Ipswich, Giles’s cartoons had to be sent from Suffolk to London before they were printed by the Daily Express and circulated among the public (which meant they could sometimes be late!). This exchange gives us a glimpse into how news, opinions and ideas were passed around before the age of the internet – this communication was not instant, and delays in trains or transport could delay this even further. Once the cartoon reached London, it still went through editorial and printing processes before finally being distributed to the public. This may seem quite different to the world we are used to today, where anyone can create and upload content to the internet and be immediately accessed by people across the world.

Ales and tales

The subject of the cartoon, set in a town pub, is also telling of an important way that news and information could spread in a time before the internet. Inns, taverns, alehouses and pubs have long been centres of exchanging gossip and local news. They have been a cornerstone of British social life for at least a thousand years, originating from a need for a clean and sterile drink, which beer, unlike water, could provide as well as being an important source of nutrients. From these humble beginnings, pubs have often been at the centre of community life. Even as homes have become more comfortable and the function of the pub has changed in more recent times, they remain an important social hub in many villages, towns and cities.

Before the internet or mobile phones, when you can send someone a quick message about something that has happened, many people would head to their local pub after work to share their stories of the day. Imagine if the scenario in the cartoon were a factual one – perhaps the farmer would mention to a friend next time he was in the pub about the strange people that filled it last time he was there, who may in turn tell someone else. Without the internet available for immediate ‘fact checking,’ news, information and gossip shared in the pub could be spread and could even change with each telling.

Modernity and ‘memes’

As we have seen, this cartoon provides an important window into how information could spread in an age before the wide-spread use of the internet. Cartoons were often created to visualise what was happening in the world at the time of the author. Although not necessarily factual, these cartoons communicated the perspective and opinion of their creator to the public when they were included in publications and newspapers. As has been demonstrated by Carl Giles, even the speed of

Fake news?:

Many people would meet in pubs to share stories or local gossip, without always knowing if they were accurate.

In what ways might we share information today without knowing if it is wholly accurate?

---

this communication was much slower than we experience today, requiring drafts and proofs of cartoons to be physically collected and transported before being printed.

While the speed at which these were distributed may be different to what we are used to, the way information was communicated, and how ‘factual’ it was, may not be so dissimilar from today. Newspapers still often include cartoons in much the same way as decades gone by, and the cartoon seems similar in function and content to a much more modern, online phenomenon – the meme.

Some readers may already be familiar with memes, defined as an idea, image, or video that is spread quickly via the internet. These often take the form of humorous image and text, and communicate the opinions, experiences and perspectives of their creator and subsequent sharers, whether that be political, cultural or social (rather similar to our cartoon!). So, while this cartoon highlights the differences in the means by which ideas, opinions and information is communicated, it can equally show us the incredible continuity in our ways of communicating ideas across many centuries.

---