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The Science of Satire

Cognition studies clash with 'New Yorker' rationale

By MAHZARIN R. BANAJI

On the morning of July 14, the Internet was clogged with discussions of the latest *New Yorker* cover depicting a Muslim Barack Obama and a terrorist Michelle Obama in fist-bumping celebration before a fireplace in which lies a burning American flag, while above it hangs a portrait of Osama bin Laden.

Asked by the Huffington Post whether, in retrospect, and in response to the public outcry, he regretted having produced the cover, the image's creator, Barry Blitt, said: "Retrospect? Outcry? The magazine just came out 10 minutes ago, at least give me a few days to decide whether to regret it or not."

If Blitt were aware of the science of social perception, he wouldn't need a few days to decide. If he were cognizant of the facts about how the mind works, the simple associations that typify the brain's ordinary connection-making, he might have thought differently before he sketched the first flame in that fireplace. If he had paid attention to a few of the dozens of experiments available — even in the popular media — that describe how the mind learns and believes, he and his boss wouldn't have responded as they did to the questions posed to them the day after the cover appeared.

I am, as are most others in my social class, an emphatic defender of the arts as a primary vehicle to irritate, aggravate, and offend. I have been trained to step back and rethink my reaction to that which jolts and nauseates me. I know that, in such moments especially, I must look within for a possible inability to transcend ingrained values. For that reason, and because we who read *The Chronicle* are likely to be among the staunchest supporters of the First Amendment, we must, of course, defend the right of *The New Yorker* to print the image it did.

What we need not defend is the absurd naïveté about the basic facts of information transmission that accompanied the reasoning behind the drawing.

David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, in total disbelief about the reaction the cover received, said that "it's a satire about the distortions and misconceptions and prejudices *about* Obama." As it happens, I know something about distortions, misconceptions, and prejudices. Especially the type that make their way to us via images we are exposed to, such as that cover, by the sheer fact of living in an open society. That is why I find the Blitt-Remnick response, even more than the image itself, to be so unfortunate. Unfortunate because it shows that artists and their managers, by remaining in the isolated world of art or publishing, cut off from the basic facts of human nature and experience, of conscious and unconscious social perception, learning and memory, have no choice but to be startled by the mismatch between their lofty intentions to do the public some good through satire and the results of their clumsy actions.

The brain, Blitt would be advised to understand, is a complex machine whose operating principles we know something about. When presented with A and B in close spatial or temporal proximity, the mind naturally and effortlessly associates the two. Obama=Osama is an easy association to produce via simple transmogrification. Flag burning=unpatriotic=un-American=un-Christian=Muslim is child's play for the cortex. Learning by association is so basic a mechanism that living beings are jam-packed with it — ask any dog the next time you see it salivating to a

tone of a bell. There is no getting around the fact that the very association Blitt helplessly confessed he didn't intend to create was made indelibly for us, by him.

It is not unreasonable, given the inquiring minds that read *The New Yorker*, to expect that an obvious caricature would be viewed as such. In fact, our conscious minds can, in theory, accomplish such a feat. But that doesn't mean that the manifest association (Obama=Osama lover) doesn't do its share of the work. To some part of the cognitive apparatus, that association is for real. Once made, it has a life of its own because of a simple rule of much ordinary thinking: Seeing is believing. Based on the research of my colleague, the psychologist Daniel Gilbert, on mental systems, one might say that the mind first believes, and only if it is relaxing in an Adirondack chair doing nothing better, does it question and refute. There is a power to all things we see and hear — exactly as they are presented to us.

For decades, psychologists have described the "sleeper effect" — the idea that information, even information we might reject at first blush, ends up persuading us, contrary to our intention, over time. That often occurs when the content of the message (Obama=Islamist) and the source providing the message (*The New Yorker* trying to be cute) have split off in our minds. When satire isn't done right, as in the case of the Obama cover, the intended parody easily splits off from the actual and more blatant association. The latter then has the power to persuade over the long haul, when conscious cognition isn't up to policing it. Communicators of mass media should be alert to that, so that decisions about particular portrayals are based on knowledge of their full impact, and the justification for the supposedly sophisticated cognitive function they serve offered in light of such basic knowledge.

What made Blitt and Remnick's response to the public outcry even more problematic were their justifications that tumbled out in response to challenges about the cover. Remnick showed off other covers by the same artist that were, in his mind, similarly offensive. In one cover image, Vice President Cheney is shown to be the boss of President Bush; in another, there's a flood in the Oval Office, with the administration afloat. Let's analyze Remnick's logic that those are psychologically equivalent to the Barack-Michelle image. When the artist's intention was to depict Cheney as the boss, he faithfully drew Cheney as the boss. That's satire? When the artist's intention was to depict the drowning of the administration, he sketched the drowning of the administration. Far out!

In a similar vein, Remnick pleaded in his own defense that he had also, some weeks ago, considered a cover of Obama wearing a number 42 shirt sliding into home base (but withdrew it because somebody else beat his magazine to it). In his opinion, that Obama-as-Jackie-Robinson cover was similar in spirit to the one he ran, just positive instead of negative. Wrong again. In the Jackie Robinson comparison, A=B (Obama=Robinson) is portrayed as A=B. In the cover in question A≠B (Obama≠Islamist) is portrayed as A=B (Obama=Islamist).

If the argument is that *The New Yorker* cover was meant to depict the radical right's ludicrous portrayal of Obama as an apologist for Islam and its fundamentalists, then the question we might pose is this: Would Blitt consider it good satirical strategy to condemn child sexual abuse by depicting a young adolescent boy and an older man, obviously just having had sex, fist-bumping with knowing pleasure? In what world would that constitute satire rather than a failed imagination? Ultimately, all the lame responses by Blitt and Remnick don't persuade because of the sharp limits of their morning-after reasoning.

Good intentions are always present, even in the naïve, and so it must be that Blitt's artistic endeavor, Remnick's printing of it, and the responses of both can most parsimoniously be explained as ignorance about the mind and how it learns. But as our worlds get more complex, as we know more about what the outside does to our inside, it is the moral responsibility of the artist to know about how art is received by its intended audience.

Mahzarin R. Banaji is a professor of psychology at Harvard University.

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