

## CHAPTER 3

# When Aping a Politician as an Ape: Making Sense of Political Caricatures on the Boundaries of Journalism

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*Political caricature is a subset of satire that visually exposes and ridicules the foolish behavior of persons engaged in power struggles in society. Political caricatures have a strong capacity to provoke and offend. They have provoked politicians to act, and they have caused public outrage, e.g. when playing with traditionally denigrating ways of representing politicians as animals. However, caricatures can be difficult to interpret for audiences, not least when first appearing in social media. Here, their contexts of production and reception are not as established or stable as in print newspapers, in which they conventionally accompany commentaries on editorial pages. Drawing on caricature theory, I argue that readers strengthen their interpretations if they acquire knowledge of genre characteristics, the type of media the caricatures appear in, the political and cultural context of the drawings, and the caricaturist. I apply such contexts in analyses of ape-like caricatures originally presented in different types of media and in different political-cultural contexts. The caricatures analyzed are: newspaper drawings by South African caricaturist Zapiro; a cover drawing from French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo by Stéphane Charbier (Charb); and drawings by the Norwegian satirical artist Thomas Knarvik that first appeared on his Facebook site. I find, in particular, that the genre-distinct features of sympathy, gap and differentiation are useful tools in assessing how the caricatures meet – or fail to meet – conditions for making sense of them.*

**Keywords:** political caricature, satire, social media, Zapiro, Charlie Hebdo

## Introduction

In May 2016, a heated debate unfolded in the Norwegian press about a caricature drawing. The artist and satirical illustrator Thomas Knarvik had drawn and posted caricatures on his Facebook site of a politician as an ape. The person caricatured was Ali Esbati, a Swedish-Iranian social commentator and parliamentarian for the left-wing party Vänsterpartiet in Sweden. He had reacted publically to a television news report made by the Norwegian national broadcaster NRK, in which Swedish police claimed that they were about to lose control of certain districts. The report was from Rinkeby, a suburb of Stockholm with a high unemployment rate and concentration of immigrants. Esbati claimed that the report showed an incorrect picture of the suburb, and that it was racist.

According to the caricaturist, his drawing entitled “The King of the Apes” – was a reaction to Esbati’s claim that NRK had promoted racism. Knarvik’s caricature represented Esbati as an ape hanging from a tree with his anus laid bare. The illustrator followed up with a drawing in which the depicted politician now licked the genitals of another Swedish social commentator, the prolific anti-racist and journalist Henrik Arnstad. These drawings led to Facebook temporarily shutting Knarvik out of the website.<sup>1</sup>

The debate that followed revolved around the question of whether it was acceptable to draw and publish caricatures that represent a politician as an ape. On one side, debaters defended the caricaturist’s right to publish the drawings under “freedom of expression”, whereas commentators on the other side condemned the caricatures as racist.

There were, however, various nuances within these two positions. Esteemed Norwegian newspaper cartoonists (Graff in Smedsrud 2016, Elvestuen, 2016) placed Knarvik in a continental European caricature tradition of depicting powerful persons as animals or in degrading sexual positions with their genitalia exposed, the purpose being to undermine the venerable, holy and pompous. The cultural commentator and sociologist Kjetil Rolness went even further in his defense and appraisal of Knarvik, seeing the ape

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1 The reason users had for reporting the drawings, and why the organization decided to shut Knarvik out, is not known (Horvei 2016).

caricatures as a civilized exposure of a politician who has repeatedly accused his critics of being racist, something Rolness viewed as a boorish master suppression technique (Rolness, 2016). Other newspaper commentators were less enthusiastic. Although defending the cartoonist's right to use political satire as he did, they could criticize his "naïve" toying with racist stereotypes. One of them claimed that the drawings embraced the dark European tradition of representing non-Europeans as wild animals, and Jews as stingy misers with curved noses (Egeland, 2016). Among the commentators most critical of the drawings was a politician who asked Knarvik to apologize to Esbati, claiming that the drawings contributed to dehumanizing opponents and the political debate, thus making the public "a more dangerous place to be for everyone with a minority background who wishes to express their views without being overwhelmed by persistent agitation and racism" (Valen, 2016, *my translation*).

Defending his caricatures, Knarvik expressed various intentions he claimed to have had, emphasizing a wish to contribute to an increased focus on the definitory power of – and a bullying culture among – politicians. He wanted to expose how a politician can stigmatize his opponents by "drawing the racist card". He stressed that a key objective of his deliberately provocative drawings was to ignite reactions and a constructive debate with "wide frames", and he claimed that his drawings succeeded in this respect (Knarvik, 2016b).

The provocations did in a sense contribute to creating "wide frames", by fostering several different interpretations of – and opinions on – the drawings, reflecting divergent views on the value of this type of caricature. Some would claim that the caricatures enriched public debate by provoking diverse reactions and that they realized a long held liberalist ideal of public discussion: to illuminate an issue from as many sides as possible and thus create a greater understanding of it.

This article's author values this potential capacity of caricatures, and I defend Knarvik's right to apply this type of political satire to express his opinions. One can wonder, however, to what extent the ape-caricature debate provided the larger public with an improved understanding of the caricatures and their message, or for that matter, what the debaters' grounds for understanding the caricatures were. The debate was – not only in social media but also in legacy media – largely

characterized by mudslinging among different fractions of the commentariat. They could level insults such as, “Esbati plays the nigger role without knowing it”, “islamist loving left-wing” (see Yusuf, 2016), and somewhat more humorously, “I do not wish to deprive anyone of a lack of ability to read art, but it is difficult not to apprehend this (the message of Esbati’s repeated racism stigmatization, *my comment*) in Knarvik’s drawings” (Mathiesen, 2016).

The coarse rhetoric reflected the strong effects applied in Knarvik’s own drawings, and I will argue that one key to decoding the caricatures is precisely the polarized debate among fractions of the chattering classes, whether taking place in social or legacy media. However, I also believe that public debate on visual satire could benefit from readers and discussants acquiring a grasp of grounds and codes for making sense of caricatures. What codes and contexts can readers draw upon to read political caricatures plausibly? I will attempt to exemplify how readers can apply certain codes and contexts in reading provocative, ape-like caricatures of politicians presented in different types of media, both print media and social media. Before examining specific examples, I will draw on theories of caricature to argue that interpretations of such drawings are strengthened if the interpreter acquires and applies knowledge of the following: genre characteristics, how a caricature’s meaning is determined by the type of media it is presented and received within, and the caricature’s political and cultural context. Some knowledge of the caricaturist will also be useful, and I will draw on that when necessary in reading the examples.

## Genre characteristics: The caricature

Caricature can be seen as a subset of satire (Streicher 1967, Bal et al., 2009). Satire demonstrates and exposes foolish, flawed and potentially harmful human behavior in order to scorn or ridicule persons or groups. Caricature can be perceived as the visualization of satire. Caricatures ludicrously exaggerate defects or peculiarities in persons through pictorial images and drawings along with their accompanying captions and words. “Cartoon” and “caricature” are often used interchangeably. Streicher (1967), however, points out that whereas “cartooning” may be said to refer to both “build-up” and “debunking” techniques of representing persons, caricature is definitely negative in its grotesque or ludicrous representation of the scorn and ridicule of human follies and vices.

As my focus is on political caricature, I find Streicher's distinction between political and social caricature helpful. He sees political caricature as dealing with the "ridicule, debunking or exposure of persons, groups and organizations engaged in power struggles in society" (Op.cit., p. 432). Social caricatures, on the other hand, deal with non-political affairs that do not possess the potential to affect the distribution of power in society. Duus (2001) draws attention to how political cartoons and caricatures can undermine the legitimacy of rulers and harm their public image, and Buell and Maus (1988) stress that politicians have feared for their public image as long as cartoonists have caricatured politicians.

Political caricature has provoked politicians to act, and even contributed to taking down corrupt politicians (Bal et al., 2009). Meyhoff Brink (in Edrup, 2016) points out, however, that satire can also be used as a weapon by rulers to oppress their people. This is typical of a form he designates as *campaign satire*, which is used to demonize your opponents to further a cause, without considering whether what one implies is true or not. For example, this was the case when the Nazis used satirical campaigns against Jews. Another form of satire according to Meyhoff Brink is *carnevalistic satire*, a form that turns things upside down, e.g. transforms a priest to an animal and vice versa. This type of satire is inclusive and rarely offends, whereas *confrontational satire* has a strong capacity to offend as it exposes everything from power abuse to hypocrisy, and in this manner confronts others with what they wish to conceal. The last is characteristic of much political caricature.

Political caricature employs analogy and ludicrous juxtaposition to sharpen the public's view of contemporary issues. Caricaturists seek to create a response from their audience, influence their way thinking, and predispose them towards a certain course of action. Although attempting to present often complex issues in a simplified and accessible form, cartoons and caricatures do not necessarily make sense to everyone who comes across them. Kleeman (2006) emphasizes that caricatures and cartoons are only meaningful to those who are familiar with the person portrayed or with the cartoonist's subject matter.

Building on works of Streicher (1967) and Coupe (1969) amongst others, Bal et. al. (2009) have developed a theory of political caricature I find particularly useful for analysis. They identify three necessary features of a person or thing to be believably or plausibly cartooned: Sympathy, gap and differentiation. *Sympathy* refers to how an audience must be able to relate to, or identify with, the

object of satire in order to understand the point of the satire. It is essential to have an affective bond – whether love, hate, derision, etc. – with the object. *Gap* refers to a disparity that exists between reality and image. A gap may be known to the audience, or it may refer to a disparity with an alternative reality created by the caricaturist, which is different from what the audience believes it to be. The caricaturist may also point out a gap between reality and the object of the satire. Finally, *differentiation* refers to a unique attribute possessed by the object of satire that distinguishes the object from other objects. The attributes may be physical, comprising material characteristics of the object such as size and shape, or they can be ideological characteristics such as ideals, values and beliefs.

Bal et al. point out that exaggeration is fundamental to caricature as it is used to magnify that which differentiates a person or thing. They hold that the potential for a cartoon to work depends on the degree of differentiation, and the degree of sympathy, that is, the extent to which the audience can relate to and identify with the object of the cartoon.

## Media contexts for political caricatures

Political caricature has been a hallmark of satirical magazines since the form was developed in England in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Rowson, 2015). A broader audience will be familiar with political caricatures from the editorial pages of (print) newspapers where they conventionally accompany commentaries. Larsen (1991) draws attention to how this placement formally equates the caricaturist with the commentary writer. The drawer also provides a commentary to ongoing public debate. As a visual commentator, however, she has more “artistic freedom” than the writer. Whereas the writer needs to argue, reflect and be analytical in order to convince, the drawer can personalize the issue with humor and irony, and transgress social manners and tact through distortions and exaggerations, thus creating an image that is contrary to prevailing factuality and common sense.

Many newspaper readers have acquired an understanding of such conventional functions of editorial caricatures, well established as they are. When appearing within legacy newspaper contexts, readers can also make sense of caricatures drawing on the message of the written commentary, as well as on their knowledge of the newspaper’s and the caricaturist’s typical political leanings and viewpoints.

But where there is a certain fixity to the meaning potential of caricatures in traditional print news media, their contexts of production and reception are not equally established or stable in digital media, particularly not in social media settings. Cartoonists have increasingly used the Internet to circumnavigate editorial controls and publish cartoons rejected by their newspapers (Danjoux 2004), and social media such as blogs and Facebook sites have facilitated the proliferation of new cartoonists. However, in media where everyone can publish their own caricatures, interpretation and assessment can be demanding. Readers often lack knowledge about the drawer and their political stance, and the motivation behind their drawings. Rather than accompanying analytical and reflective texts typical of newspaper commentaries, the caricatures in social media may appear in commentary contexts in which the unrestrained language of fierce opinion is prevalent. If drawings are censored, as was the case with Knarvik's ape caricatures, new challenges of assessment occur as the settings in which they were originally presented can no longer be accessed. Controversial cartoons may then reappear in newspaper contexts in which the drawings acquire new meaning as they may be subject to polarized debates of the kind we outlined above, as well as the caricaturist's reinterpretations and rationalizations of his own drawings in response to accusations of offensive representations. Note, however, that readers who get specific information such as political news and comments through one medium are likely to acquire topical information through other media as well. According to the complementarity framework proposed by Dutta-Bergman (2004), segments of users access various media formats due to their interest in particular issues. Thus, social media and more established media such as printed cartoons complement rather than compete with each other (Terblanche, 2011).

## Political and cultural context

In decoding the meaning of caricatures, the interpreter can fruitfully explore the wider political and cultural context of the caricatured political act or event that is placed on the news media agenda. Relevant knowledge can be gained from looking at the satirized politician's history and record, the political system or government of which the object of satire is a part, as well as the nature of the incident that triggered the caricature.

The meaning of political caricatures may also be determined by their allusions to – or playing with – traditionally denigrating ways of representing politicians as animals. Hervé (2016) draws attention to how satire through history has been misused in far-right and racist propaganda. In Europe, there has been a tradition of anti-semitic caricatures. Because of the propaganda effect of caricatures and satire in general, the form can easily be used to promote racism and xenophobia. In France, for example, the weekly far-right satirical newspaper *Minute*, is known for comparing the former French Guianese Justice Minister Christiane Taubira to a monkey.

There is, undoubtedly, a long and dishonorable tradition of comparing black people to monkeys in the US and Europe. In America in the 1800s, associating black people with monkeys and apes was a way to justify slavery. Black people were considered by some white people to be more simian than human, and therefore had no self-evident rights, such as freedom (The Authentic History Center, 2012). The depiction of black people as apes was expressed in mainstream popular culture towards the end of the 19th century in the so-called “coon caricature”: “coon” being a disparaging term for a black person. Such stereotypes were pervasive throughout the colonial world in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a well-known cartoon example being the comic book *Tintin in the Congo* with its depiction of Africans as inferior apelike creatures. The tradition is still upheld, e.g. anti-black monkey images resurfaced during the 2008 campaign of Barack Obama. Buttons and T-shirts depicting him as a banana-eating monkey were distributed, and the imagery continued to proliferate on the Internet after Obama’s election.

Caricatures comparing black people to monkeys, then, have consistently been used to denigrate black people as being less worthy of dignity than their white counterparts.

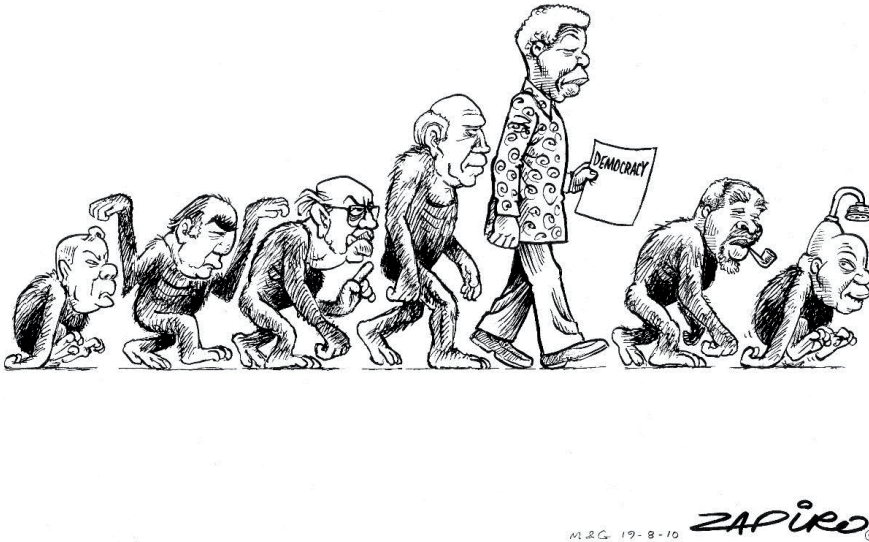
## Reading political caricatures

### Caricatures originating in print media

Let us first consider ape-like caricatures of politicians that were initially presented in different types of print media in a range of political and cultural contexts.

In the cartoon (fig. 3.1) from the print edition of *Mail & Guardian*, a weekly newspaper with a focus on political analysis and investigative reporting, the prominent South African caricaturist Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro) plays with what has





**Figure 3.1.** Evolution of Democracy © Zapiro. Originally published in *Mail and Guardian*, August 19, 2010. Reprinted with permission; no reuse without rightsholder permission.

become a canonical cultural icon, the depiction of the concept of evolution as a linear sequence of advancing forms. The sequence is conventionally represented as a march, moving from a stooped ape to an upright human. In this manner, the canonical image typically equates evolution with progress, and represents the human being as the apex of life's history. Zapiro has depicted, from the left, heads of state in South Africa during the apartheid era: Hendrik Verwoerd, B.J. Vorster, P.W. Botha and F.W. de Klerk. To the right of them are the country's post-apartheid presidents: Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma.

Printed on 19 August 2010, the political context for making sense of the drawing (hinted at in an accompanying text in the newspaper) is that this was when Zuma ordered police to crush a national workers' wage strike. This was also the period that the ANC (African National Congress, the governing party of which Zuma is currently president) proposed Protection of Information laws and the Media Appeals Tribunal. According to South African journalists (Shaw, 2010), the new laws would allow the government to classify a broad range of material that at the time was not secret. The tribunal would also be given powers to rule on media content and impose penalties on journalists.

The object of satire for Zapiro's drawing should be clear to readers familiar with the political context. Zapiro is playing with the cultural icon that represents evolution as progress. He does this by drawing a march moving from primitive hominids or human-ape hybrids to an apex with a full-fledged human being, the Nelson Mandela figure, who is marching behind primitive hominids who are currently in the position of leading the march. In contrast to the human-ape hybrids, Mandela carries a sheet of paper marked DEMOCRACY. In this manner, the cartoon satirizes, in particular, the politicians succeeding Mandela – and their politics. While the white, primitive hominid politicians from the apartheid period preceding Mandela appear undeniably as ludicrous figures, a certain progression is implied in the depiction of the movement towards the more upright walking figure of F.W. de Klerk. With the marked visual descent of the figures after Mandela, the ridicule becomes more apparent. What could be seen as a progression up to Mandela is, after him – in the context of current politics – clearly a regression. In the cartoon, the figure of Zuma marks a low point, visually, on the level with apartheid architect Verwoerd. The Zuma figure is, moreover, drawn with a showerhead affixed to his skull. This is a recurring trait in Zapiro's Zuma caricatures, which is directly related to Zuma's claim in a 2006 rape trial against him that in order to protect himself from contracting HIV he quickly took a shower after he had unprotected sex with his accuser, a young woman whom he knew had HIV (see Baldauf, 2011).

What is the *gap* between image and reality that this cartoon satirizes? It may be seen as the disparity between, on the one hand, what the cartoonist ironically depicts as the reality South Africa now faces through the politics of the country's current leadership (a devolution of democracy), and, on the other hand, what the object of the satire claims it to be. Zuma is fond of projecting an image of South Africa as a great democracy. In his State of the Nation address in the year this cartoon was published, he spoke of the country as "a shining example of freedom and democracy" (Zuma quoted in Nkosi, 2010).

As the cartoonist himself has suggested (Zapiro, 2016), readers most probably related to the object of satire here. In other words, the cartoon met a necessary condition for the satire to work: readers had the *sympathy* needed to grasp the cartoon. Many probably also recognized attributes that *differentiate* the object of satire. The characteristics of the uncivilized and undemocratic policies of the majority of these politicians are implied metaphorically by the human-ape

hybrid figures, and Zuma's primitiveness is furthermore ridiculed through the trait depicting his apparent belief that showering prevents HIV infection.

Interestingly, a more recent Zapiro cartoon (fig. 3.2), published in the daily South African newspaper *The Times* elicited a very different kind of public reaction. The cartoon depicts Zuma as an organ grinder, and the head of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), Shaun Abrahams, as a monkey dancing to the president's tune. The context was Abrahams's announcement (on May 23, 2016) that the NPA would appeal the court ruling that corruption charges must be reinstated against Zuma.

Unlike the previous cartoon, this one resulted in public outrage, and accusations of racism. In defending his cartoon, Zapiro explained that he intended the image of the organ grinder and his dancing monkey to be read metaphorically, referring to how the president was in control of Abrahams (Davis, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Zapiro (2016) also pointed out how he – without igniting accusations of racism – had depicted shamefully poor presidents and prime ministers, both black and white, as primitive hominids in an earlier cartoon (*The Evolution of Democracy*, discussed above).

Zapiro's defense did not mitigate the public criticism and condemnation of the cartoon. Why did so many have problems with relating to the satire of this cartoon and see it as offensively racist? A news event in South Africa early in 2016 could be part of the contextual explanation. A South African estate agent, Penny Sparrow, posted a comment on Facebook in which she blamed black revellers for littering a beach during New Year's Eve celebrations, describing them as monkeys (Wicks, 2016). The comment reignited an angry debate about the state of race relations in the country 22 years after the end of apartheid.

Zapiro's fellow cartoonists have said that they understand his use of metaphor in the cartoon and do not consider it racist, but they do see his timing of the cartoon as wrong, given the current context (Siwela & Ngubane, 2016, May 25). In terms of the broad public condemnation of the drawing, we may more generally ask if people's failure to *sympathize* with the cartoon was merely due to them not "getting it", as Zapiro (2016) himself has suggested. Rather than not being able to understand the metaphor of the cartoon, many readers may not have been willing to *accept* the depiction of Abrahams as a monkey in the

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2 According to Oxford Dictionaries the metaphorical meaning of "organ grinder" is conventionally "a person in control of another" ([https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/organ\\_grinder](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/organ_grinder)).



**Figure 3.2.** Another State Organ © Zapiro. Originally published in *The Times*, May 24, 2016. Reprinted with permission; no reuse without rightsholder permission.

current cultural context, or, more broadly, given the long tradition of denigrating black people by drawing them as monkeys.

## A Charlie Hebdo cartoon

Decoding the following drawing (fig. 3.3) may be somewhat more demanding. Specialized knowledge of media contexts as well the broader cultural context for the political caricature – and a competence in the French language – will strengthen the grounds for avoiding misinterpretation.<sup>3</sup> Many condemned it as evidence of racism that had “provoked” the murders of members of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. The drawing, published in an issue of the magazine prior to the terrorist massacre, depicted the black Justice Minister in France, Christiane Taubira, as a monkey.

3 The author of this chapter had to read contextualizing articles written by persons with such knowledge of French culture, politics, media and satirical publications.



**Figure 3.3.** Facsimile of drawing by Stéphane Charbier (Charb), on page 16 of Charlie Hebdo No. 1115, October 2013. Facsimile reproduced in accordance with the Norwegian Copyright Act.

A reader who is not familiar with the cartoonist's subject matter may quickly jump to the conclusion that this depiction of a black person as a monkey is racist. Even if readers are familiar with the person portrayed, a hasty framing of the object of the satire as the politician Christiane Taubira herself would imply that the caricature was mocking the justice minister in a degrading

manner. Frequent sharing of the image of Taubira on social media without the crucial elements accompanying the drawing (the text above the drawing and the logo at the bottom-left, see LorenzoA, 2016), could have contributed to the vocal misreading and condemnation of the caricature.

However, even with the accompanying elements in place, the reader would need relevant cultural knowledge to give a plausible answer to the key question: What is the object of the satire? For those familiar with French politics, the blue and red flame logo is a clear signal of whom the cartoon is mocking: this is the logo of Front National, the far right political party. The caricature phrase, “Rassemblement Blue Raciste” (Racist Blue Rally (or gathering/unity)), alludes to the slogan of Front National: “Rassemblement Bleu Marine” (Navy Blue Rally), a slogan that again is a word play on the name of the political party’s leader, Marine Le Pen. Provided they have knowledge of this context, the object of the satire should be clear to the reader: the cartoon is mocking the racism of Front National. This contextual knowledge, then, may be seen as a prerequisite for being able to relate to the object, the condition for caricature termed as *sympathy* above. For dedicated followers of Charlie Hebdo, a satirical journal with a staunch anti-racist stance (Leigh, 2015, LorenzaA, 2016), the emotion relating to the object of satire here would be negative, one of mistrust or even antipathy.

Culturally informed readers could make further sense of the object of the satire by expanding the context. The drawing may be seen as an allusion to a Front National politician, Anne-Sophie Leclere, who had shared a photoshop image of Taubira drawn as a monkey on Facebook and made racist remarks about her on French television (Knight, 2015; Le Monde, 2013). In a broader context, one could also include what has been considered a continuing attempt by Marine Le Pen to portray her party as more moderate than what her father Jean-Marie Le Pen did when he was its leader. In this perspective, the Hebdo caricature criticizes what the magazine essentially sees as a marketing move by Marine Le Pen, and draws attention to the fact that below the surface nothing has changed: Front National is still a racist party (see LorenzoA, 2016).

What, then, is the *gap* between image and reality created by this cartoon? A plausible reading could be to view the Front National’s self-promoting image as deceptive and the Hebdo caricature itself as representing what is the “true face” of the party through the caricaturist’s wordplay on their slogan and juxtapositioning of the logo and the racist imagery. As for *differentiation*, the

unique attribute that the object of the caricature possesses, the depiction of Taubira as a monkey together with the logo and the phrase all serve to illustrate the marked racist views that still surface in the party, and that distinguish it in French politics. This use of the monkey or ape image is different from that of Zapiro's, in that his caricatures (analyzed above) were evidence of the cartoonist's attitude to the politicians depicted, whereas here, the monkey is evidence of the political party's attitude to another politician.

Acquiring knowledge of the cartoonist could have countered the misinterpretation of the cartoon. It was drawn by Stéphane Charbier, one of the cartoonists who was murdered in the Hebdo terrorist massacre. Known as Charb, he was a controversial drawer not least due to his contemptuous ridiculing of religion. But he was also a marked anti-racist who participated in anti-racist activities and illustrated the poster for the non-governmental organization Movement Against Racism and for Friendship Between People (see Knight, 2015).

## Caricatures first presented in social media

The task of producing plausible readings of caricatures that have originated in a social media environment such as Facebook, may, as indicated, be even more challenging than for those initially presented in print media. One thing is deciphering the tribal language that tends to develop within the enclosed system of friends and followers of the caricaturists. Caricatures first published on Facebook may also acquire several new meanings if they are offensive enough to start traveling across different types of media, contextualized by different groups of actors and verbal codes.

### *Reading examples by satire artist Knarvik*

I now concentrate on a couple of Thomas Knarvik's caricatures. Many readers, including this author, became acquainted with his Facebook caricatures through legacy media in which they were subject to the heated debate described in the introduction. A crucial political context for making sense of his caricature of the Swedish politician, Ali Esbati portrayed as an ape (fig. 3.4), is not only the debate over the NRK report and the politician Esbati's reaction. This was a continuation of a long-running dispute between predominantly left-oriented participants on one side and participants with clearer liberalist leanings on the other side over issues of immigration and integration in Scandinavia.

A particular focus and target in Norwegian media has been on what the liberally inclined debate participants see as a consensus-oriented Swedish public sphere that inhibits a free exchange of opinion, and a tendency among some politicians immediately to stamp criticism of Islam as Islamophobia or cultural racism. Liberally inclined debaters argue that it is in this climate of “tolerance” or political correctness that minority ethnicity can be used by politicians such as Esbati to protect themselves against criticism – and to promote allegations and accusations of racism in a manner that those belonging to the ethnic majority cannot allow themselves to do.

Knarvik’s caricatures and his accompanying comments on Facebook target particularly what he sees as political correctness and articulations of antiracism that threaten free expression. He was not a well-known public figure when his ape caricatures appeared in legacy media in May 2016. But for those seeking clues to make sense of them at that time, he had articulated the objectives of his project in some of his foregoing media appearances. The academy educated artist had specifically expressed admiration of his earlier teacher Lars Vilks, a Swedish artist and activist known for his Muhammed drawings, which resulted in failed attempts by Islamic extremists to murder him. In a commentary on the 2015 Copenhagen terrorist attacks (Knarvik, 2015), Knarvik defends Vilks and other artists’ use of provocative tools in the name of freedom of expression. In 2015, Knarvik completed *In His Name*, an art project in the form of a collection of caricature drawings critical of religion, but the Norwegian publisher chose not to distribute the book. In Danish newspapers, Knarvik explained that he had drawn the caricatures in sympathy with the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, and moreover that he attempts to do what Chaplin does in his film *The Dictator*: “to banalize absolute authority” (Knarvik quoted in Schollert, 2015). A short time before a new book with his caricatures was published (*In Your Face*, Knarvik, 2016c), the caricaturist changed his Facebook name from Thomas Knarvik to the moniker Thomas Hebdo.

For readers who have had the opportunity to follow Knarvik on his Facebook page by being accepted by him as a friend, the King of the Apes caricature could be accessed there from May 14, 2016. Underneath the ape caricature of Ali Esbati (fig. 3.4) hanging from a branch, the text apparently mimics the voice of the “ape politician”, written in Swedish: “You are racists, you, you, you are racists, you are racists every one of you are racists, y y you, you you are racists, you are all racists” (*my translation*).





**Figure 3.4.** A facsimile of Thomas Knarvik's first Esbati caricature, "King of the Apes", as it appeared below a text by the drawer on his Facebook page on May 14, 2016. Facsimile reproduced in accordance with the Norwegian Copyright Act.

This caricature is typical of the drawer in the sense that his object of satire normally is on the left side of the political spectrum. Here, Knarvik can target what he sees as “dogmatic” voices, whether belonging to politicians, authors or journalists. Less often does he attack conservative-liberal voices such as those of the most powerful politicians in the conservative coalition governing Norway at the time of writing. The Facebook caricature is also typical in the way he introduces it with a text that may be seen as an immediate context offered by the drawer for decoding the caricature. In my translation, the text above the caricature reads:

Ali Esbati, politician in the Swedish Parliament for the Left Party, wishes to point out to all of us that NRK is racist. Sylvi Listhaug<sup>4</sup> should be sacked, etc., and for the most part, the rest of us are also racists. Comical Ali should maybe consider taking a little break in his favorite tree. Had I not known better, I would think he was on the payroll of Gule<sup>5</sup> and the center against racism. “Hard-working” Esbati should understand that the great obstacle to the worker culture is the conservatism of instinct. Listen and learn from other things than your own fixed dogmas, and pick up a few instincts while you are up in your tree. Because you have got it in you, Esbati!

This text is a far cry from the analytical and deliberative texts characteristic of journalistic commentaries that accompany caricatures. Written in colloquial language it alternately addresses the reader and Esbati, and at the same time presupposes quite detailed contextual knowledge of debates in the news media in order to make sense of ironic statements such as “I would think he was on the payroll of Gule”.

The response to the text and drawing as presented on his Facebook page, however, testified to how his friends there could *sympathize* with the satire. In the thread following the caricature, most of the commentators related enthusiastically to it, and thus amplified the views of the caricaturist commentator.

What is the disparity between image and reality here? From the perspective of Knarvik and his approving followers/commentators, I interpret the *gap* as being between the object of satire (Esbati) and the reality of the NRK report that triggered Esbati’s reaction (and, as a consequence, the caricature).

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4 Listhaug is at the time of writing Norwegian Minister of Migration and Immigration, representing the conservative-liberal Progress party.

5 Lars Gule is a Norwegian social scientist and expert commentator who condemned Knarvik’s Esbati drawing as racist.

Knarvik implies that the report is a realistic documentation of a Swedish suburb with a major immigration problem, whereas the depicted politician has – once again – neglected reality by stigmatizing people who have expressed other views than his as racists.

However, the extent to which this is considered a gap with a satirical function will depend on how the reader-observer decodes the ape image. Esbati may be seen as an *aping* politician by the way he repeats what many perceive as a “politically correct”, albeit mistaken, accusation of racism. “Aping” is then understood as blatantly imitating something or someone. In this sense, the caricature can be seen as a mocking exposure of a politician who routinely repeats accusations of racism. Such an interpretation is supported by a follow-up caricature of Esbati, now drawn as naked and holding an ape-costume over his outstretched arm, beneath the utterance: “Here you can see! I am not an ape!” (*my translation*). This imagery playfully suggests how Esbati’s accusations can be seen metaphorically as an act of donning a costume when necessary for the strategic purpose of silencing opposing political views and promoting his own.

However, as noted above, quite a few interpreters – not least commentators in the legacy media – read the caricature differently. They saw it as an exposure of racism through its framing of an immigrant politician in a degrading manner. These negative readings were, however, in turn opposed by other writers who pointed to the fact that Esbati has an Iranian background and that there is no tradition for humiliating caricatures of Iranians as monkeys.

In interviews (e.g. Meisingset, 2016) and his own commentaries (e.g. Knarvik, 2016a), Knarvik confirms that he has knowledge of how the ape as a symbol is part of a racist tradition, but he also claims that he believed that his ape caricatures would be understood as “parodically racist” and signal that they were not meant as “sincerely racist” (2016a). A plausible interpretation of his politician-as-ape project is that he consciously plays with a racist stereotype to provoke reactions and debate. Contrary to his own expressed puzzlement with the condemnatory readings, it is reasonable to assume that a confrontational caricaturist like Knarvik eagerly sought to provoke the kind of reaction he got from several commentators. If a caricaturist who wishes to expose dogmas and follies of the “politically correct” could make left-leaning politicians and public debaters condemn an ambiguous drawing univocally as an expression of racism, that would be an ultimate triumph for the artist as

provocateur. By confirming how readily they also “draw the racist card” he expands his object of satire not only to include Esbati, but also what Knarvik sees as Esbati’s likeminded opinion leaders in public debate.

Some of Knarvik’s other caricatures that were initially presented on Facebook have been recontextualized in legacy media settings and subject to diverse opinionating there. This has in turn fostered reactions from the artist himself to commentators’ ‘misinterpretations’, followed by his lengthy explanations – whether expressed in press interviews or on his Facebook page – of what their true meaning is. These explanations, however, are not necessarily enlightening, and may rather testify to a forced attempt to redeem himself after publishing a drawing few people understood. A case in point is a controversial drawing entitled “The Holy Trinity”, which depicts the Norwegian Labour party politician Trond Giske with a little ape child in his arms and with an erect penis from which his partner Haddy N’jie, depicted as a semi-ape, hangs. N’jie, who at the time the drawing was published was expecting a child with Giske, is a well-known and respected Norwegian musician and journalist with a father from Gambia and a mother from Norway. According to Knarvik, the intention of the drawing was to defend N’jie against the persecution she had been subject to when being called “You rude, disgusting semi-ape” (*my translation*) on Facebook. The drawing is about “how unbelievably banal and silly it is to call N’jie a “semi-ape”, the artist commented (In Meisingset, 2016, *my translation*). The problem is that virtually no one saw that point. Rather, they saw a very repulsive drawing that clearly could be interpreted as racist. In other words, the audience could not accept the caricature, see its *gap*, or its elements of *differentiation*. The satire simply failed.

## Conclusions

By drawing on theories of caricature, I have attempted to elucidate how certain codes and contexts can be applied when reading provocative political caricatures. I have argued that readers strengthen their interpretations of such caricatures if they acquire knowledge of genre characteristics, the caricature drawer, the type of media the caricatures appear within, and the political and cultural context of the drawings. I exemplified the application of such contexts through analyses of caricatures originally presented in different types of media, both print and social media, and in the different political-cultural contexts of South Africa, France and Norway.

For the different caricatures discussed here, I have found that the genre-distinct features of *sympathy*, *gap* and *differentiation* are useful tools in assessing how they meet or create necessary conditions for making sense of and appreciating them, that is, for satire to occur. My discussion of the different cartoons illustrated, however, that the “success” of caricatures may largely depend on whether or not the reader applies appropriate contexts in decoding them. The Charlie Hebdo example testified to how cultural knowledge is vital for reading the caricature plausibly, as a mocking of Front National politics rather than misinterpreting it as racist. The widespread public disapproval of Zapiro’s organ grinder cartoon, on the other hand, may not so much be a question of many South Africans not being able to understand it. Rather, it may signal that they are not willing to *accept* it in the context of the preceding racist posting on Facebook and the angry debate it triggered on the state of racism in the nation. In the case of the Holy Trinity caricature by Knarvik, there is no appropriate context to draw on for satire to occur. The drawing does not meet any of the necessary conditions for making sense of it as satire. It appears only as an ugly drawing.

Interaction between print and social media has an impact on the meaning of the caricatures. For the three cartoons that originated in print media, we note how social media may have played a vital role in the framing and reception of them. The Hebdo caricature alluded to a photoshop montage on Facebook that presented Taubira as a monkey, and the mass reaction on Twitter (Wicks, 2016) to Sparrow’s racist posting on Facebook is a crucial context for understanding the public condemnation of Zapiro’s organ grinder cartoon. Moreover, both Hebdo’s Front National satire and the organ grinder drawing could be shared on social media without vital elements necessarily included (LorenzoA, 2016; Zapiro, 2016).

As for The King of the Apes, conditions for making sense of this controversial cartoon changed markedly when it was “taken out” of the echo chamber of the drawer’s Facebook page and recontextualized in legacy media. Notably, when members of the commentariat condemned the cartoon, Knarvik seized the opportunity to elaborate on what his intentions were and what the drawing signified. Disapproving responses from the commentariat were, moreover, productive for him in the sense that they triggered several new mocking caricatures of his critics, published on his Facebook page.

The extent to which the different caricaturists discussed in this article take part in a *journalistic* endeavor varies. Whereas Zapiro's work is an inherent part of the journalistic news media they appear in, Knarvik definitely operates on – or rather beyond – the boundaries of journalism. Like Zapiro, he does create caricatures that can be seen as examples of confrontational satire in the way they attempt to expose the potentially harmful behavior of individuals engaged in power struggles in society, with a capacity to offend. However, the drawings of Knarvik – who has made a habit of accusing mainstream journalism of being out of touch with reality – quite often appear as a form of confrontational *art* pieces that tend to be more ambiguous in their expression than journalistic caricature. The artist's Facebook page can be conceived of as not only a place to boost his morale from devotee feedback every time he publishes a new drawing, but also as a laboratory for testing the boundaries of what is permitted there. If Facebook shuts Knarvik out due to his being reported for an offensive caricature, he gets press in the legacy media from which he can build his brand as a brave provocateur. Ultimately, the most exposed individual in his satirical-artistic project is the artist himself, Thomas Knarvik.

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