

UNDER PRESSURE

Report on
the situation
of threatened
cartoonists
around the world

2023-2025



► Nardi (Italy)



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Avec le soutien du
Fonds Mondial de l'UNESCO
pour la Défense des Médias

Front cover illustration: Zehra (Türkiye),
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Date of publication: March 2026

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Introduction

The decline of the American empire

Political and editorial cartoonists have continued to suffer from the adverse trends already noted in our previous report, compiled two years ago.

In countries well-known for their history of media control, the same practices are obviously continuing, and our colleagues no longer express themselves within these regions, or else carefully avoid any political topic unless they're drawing from exile abroad. China, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Cuba continue to produce their annual share of alerts, recorded by our team in collaboration with Cartoonists Rights. The absence of alerts from such countries generally reflects a lack of cartoons published, not of censorship.

These dictatorships and other regimes heading in the same direction always use the same tactics: first, direct pressure from the highest authorities; second, media lynching; and third, media self-censorship (the inevitable result of the first two practices). Pressure, intimidation, and self-censorship: a classic and pernicious trifecta, as Julie Trébault of ARC notes in the following pages. And now, in this year's surprise turnaround, these same tactics are being used in the United States! In an unlikely reversal, the "Land of the Free" is now flashing bright red on our threat map (see p.5). With the same three observations: direct pressure from the White House to ban an exhibition whose critical narrative on the history of the US fails to fit in with Trumpist revisionism on national greatness; MAGA hordes spewing hateful rhetoric resulting in censorship and even the dismissal of cartoonists; and finally, self-censorship by the media, with the highly emblematic case of *The Washington Post*, whose brilliant Ann Telnaes resigned after the unusual rejection of her cartoon featuring the paper's owner Jeff Bezos and Donald Trump.

What's more, the US authorities are now distorting the notion of freedom of speech: Trump supporters demand it when it comes to promoting extremist and nationalist ideas – free to say whatever they like as long as it serves the president's agenda, even going so far as to accuse Europe of stifling "free speech" (!) – while cracking down on criticism of the regime, as in the good old days of dictatorship. Even in this gigantic democracy, this empire of *dessins de presse*, which for many years had the largest number of cartoonists in the world, the sector is in rapid decline. It's a serious warning for Europe: will the Old Continent, the cradle of satirical cartoons in the 18th century, go down the same path or, on the contrary, will it take up the torch as the global beacon of cartoons, critical thinking, and freedom of speech? The question is historic, serious, and urgent: cartoons have always been a barometer of democracy.

Kak
President of Cartooning for Peace



▲ **Kak**
(France)
"At the time, we tried to anticipate the future, not the past..."

For obvious reasons of patriotism or security, the situation remains loaded for critical expression in countries at war. This is especially true in the face of regimes that no longer hesitate to target journalists, violating all international conventions, such as Russia in Ukraine or the State of Israel in the Gaza Strip.

Another well-documented trend is the gradual slide towards increasingly repressive control of the media in India and Türkiye. Under Mr. Erdoğan, the last satirical magazine has seen its premises invaded, its editorial staff arrested, and its publication banned, probably permanently.

Failed by media old & new, cartoonists walk a narrowing path

Cartoonists Rights Network International (Cartoonists Rights for short) is proud to have consulted upon and contributed to this latest piece of reporting, produced in large measure by our friends and counterparts at Cartooning for Peace.

In the concluding pages of the last joint report (*Cartoonists on the Line, 2020-2022*) we noted how important it was to gauge the experiences of cartoonists as they make use of digital platforms and so we are particularly pleased to be able to present findings from an extensive survey project addressing those concerns. I wish to thank Forum for Humor & the Law (ForHum) and Global Freedom of Expression, Columbia University who were of invaluable help in implementing this research.

It has been known for many years that the prevalence of cartoonists' work in traditional news media is diminishing if not collapsing. But in addition, it is now very apparent that cartoonists everywhere are being failed by the social media platforms that promised new audiences. The big tech mavens responsible pay lip service to free speech while increasingly relying upon algorithms, generative AI, "rage bait" and other methodologies that run counter to factual and journalistic content, as well as acquiescing to and associating with authoritarians.

Internet giants show only lip service to freedom of expression.

Also, since ours is an American NGO we cannot help but be alarmed and saddened as the USA emerges among those countries figuring most



prominently in the data on incidents of censorship and threats to cartoonists. Kak has outlined the trends very well and further detail follows, so I will not repeat the complaint. The root of the problem is obvious.

▲ Joep Bertrams (The Netherlands)

Suffice to say we will continue to work with our partners the Freedom Cartoonists Foundation, Geneva, to acknowledge and support the very bravest with our alternating programme of prize-giving. As foundation president Patrick Chappatte observes in his contribution, it seems likely a Courage in Cartooning Award may be granted closer to home, and sooner than we ever imagined.

Terry Anderson
Executive Director of Cartoonists Rights

Foreword

This report aims to provide an overview of the situation of political and editorial cartoonists who have been threatened over the past two years, while making recommendations to strengthen their protection.

As part of a project supported by UNESCO's Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF), researchers Ana Pedrazzini and Alberto Godioli conducted research on online censorship based on a questionnaire distributed in 2025 to cartoonists around the world. The analysis of this research informs the reflections presented throughout this report.

In order to gather information on the situation of cartoonists around the world, Cartooning for Peace and Cartoonists Rights carry out daily monitoring and rigorous recording of cases of cartoonists under threat, with the help of their partners. Cartooning for Peace has chosen to define a typology of threats targeting cartoonists (see below) in order to refine its census and adhere to a methodology based on a classification of a series of threats, accompanied by their definitions. This methodology is likely to evolve and be improved as new information and cases are added.

Threat typology

Arrest

Arrest by law enforcement agencies.

Assassination attempt

A deliberate act made with intention to kill another person, but without a death occurring.

Call for censorship

Attempted censorship (call for boycott, denunciation, public pressure targeting a cartoon and/or the work of a cartoonist).

Censorship

Editorial or political cartoon that has been withdrawn, blocked, and/or prevented from appearing (in media, cultural venues, etc).

Counterfeiting

Reproduction, imitation, or total or partial use of a cartoonist's intellectual property without authorisation.

Cyberattack

Malicious online attack by an individual, group, or state against a cartoonist.

Death threats

Death threats received following the publication of a cartoon.

Forced disappearance

Arrest, detention, or abduction by State authorities, non-State armed groups, or persons acting with their authorisation, and with the circumstances kept secret.

Harassment

Repeated violence, which may be verbal, physical, and/or psychological.

Imprisonment

Sentence of time in prison following a criminal conviction.

Inhuman or degrading treatment

Violation of physical or mental integrity, incompatible with human dignity.

Loss of employment following controversy

Controversy over a cartoon published in the media leading to the dismissal of the cartoonist, or a member of the editorial team of the media outlet in which the cartoon was published.

Legal proceedings

Prosecution for offences that do not fall within the limitations on freedom of expression provided for by law in a democratic society, or that are punishable by excessive penalties under European and/or international

law standards, or that are used for the purpose of criminalisation.

Online censorship

Editorial or political cartoon that has been removed, blocked, and/or prevented from appearing on a website or digital platform.

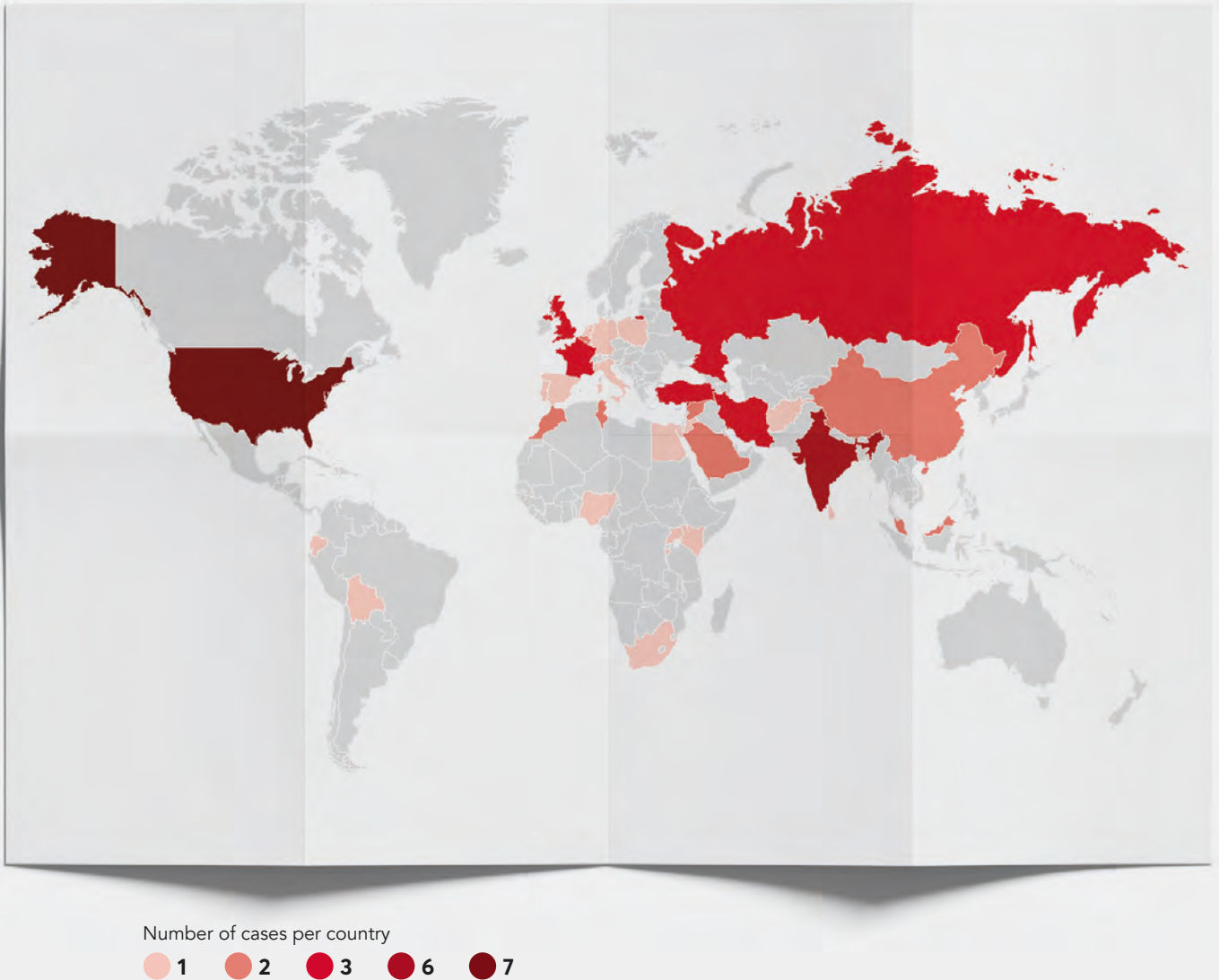
Pre-trial detention

Detention by law enforcement prior to legal proceedings.

Transnational repression

All repressive actions taken by certain governments to identify, locate, monitor, intimidate, censor, repatriate, or attempt to kill their opponents and political rivals abroad.

Cases reported by Cartooning for Peace from 2023 to 2025



Although this report refers to the methodology defined by Cartooning for Peace, it does not claim to be exhaustive. The lack of information and data in certain regions of the world should be taken into account by the reader.

While the data collection work has enabled Cartooning for Peace and Cartoonists Rights to identify trends in the situation of threatened cartoonists over the past two years, it is also important to question the context.

Certain regions do not offer the conditions necessary for the exercise of this profession due to the nature of their political regimes, the existence

or absence of a free press and/or a tradition of political cartooning. The uneven distribution of cases of threats illustrated by our map above should also be read in light of these factors.

The map presented in this report reflects data collected by Cartooning for Peace in partnership with Cartoonists Rights. The geographical nomenclature adopted by Cartooning for Peace and Cartoonists Rights is aligned with that of our partners. Hence Türkiye has been included in the Europe zone; the Middle East and North Africa are grouped together in the MENA region¹; Russia is located partly in Europe and partly in Central Asia.

¹ Middle East and North Africa.

WHY POWER
HATES HUMOR...



◀ Pedro
X. Molina
(Nicaragua)

Acknowledgements

The authors of this report would like to thank:

The cartoonists who, through their work and testimonies, contributed to the development of this report. Cartooning for Peace and Cartoonists Rights salutes their courage and determination to continue practising their profession despite the risks involved.

UNESCO/GMDF and CFC, which made this third report possible, produced as part of the project 'Highlighting the situation of press cartoonists around the world', implemented by Cartooning for Peace.

Our partners The Forum for Humour and the Law (ForHum) and Columbia Global Freedom of Expression (Columbia University) for their contribution to its success.

The many partners who, beyond their unwavering support for the daily work of monitoring, support and alerting, contributed in one way or another to the preparation of this report. In particular, the authors of the contributions that punctuate and enrich the document:

- Riss, cartoonist and editor-in-chief of *Charlie Hebdo*
- Cherian George, professor of media studies at Hong Kong Baptist University
- Jonathan Dagher, head of the Middle East desk, Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
- Patrick Gathara, journalist, cartoonist and author
- Emanuele del Rosso, cartoonist, member of Cartooning for Peace and director of the European Cartoon Award
- Sophie Walter, head of public affairs and communications for Europe, Appeals Centre Europe
- Julie Trébault, director of Artists at Risk Connection (ARC)
- Patrick Chappatte, editorial cartoonist, president of the Freedom Cartoonists Foundation
- Omar Zevallos, journalist and cartoonist
- Alberto Godioli, associate professor at the University of Groningen and co-founder of the Forum for Humour and Law (ForHum)
- Ana Pedrazzini, researcher in communication and semiotic studies at the Patagonian Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences (IPEHCS), CONICET-National University of Comahue, Argentina
- Hawley Johnson, PhD, associate director, Columbia Global Freedom of Expression, University of Columbia
- Vincent Berthier, head of the Technology and Journalism desk at Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

General overview



Censura y autocensura

▲ Solís (Mexico)
"Censorship and self-censorship"

The year 2025 marks the tenth anniversary of the attacks on the editorial staff at *Charlie Hebdo*. It is a sombre reminder that we must not forget the threats that still hang over cartoonists and their freedom of expression.

In highlighting the authoritarian excesses of certain political regimes and the scourges of our time, editorial and political cartoonists are often on the front line, at risk of censorship and human rights violations.

Their situation around the world illustrates the climate of repression that prevails in many countries. Yet cartoons are forced to evolve in

an increasingly perilous global environment. Freedom of expression, and with it freedom of the press – recognised as a fundamental right and a true hallmark of democracy – is increasingly threatened and exploited.

First and perhaps foremost today, the context of war greatly affects cartoonists. Armed conflicts, whether in Ukraine, Sudan or the Democratic Republic of Congo, directly threaten their physical safety and jeopardise their work. In October 2024, Palestinian cartoonist Mahasen al-Khateeb was killed in an Israeli military bombing raid in Gaza. Elsewhere, cartoonists are forced into exile, while others are denied the conditions necessary to continue drawing and publishing. Since the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan, cartoonists have been forced into hiding and as such can no longer publish their cartoons.

More and more abusive lawsuits are circumventing the use of the law to censor.

At the same time, we are witnessing the rise of authoritarianism all over the map and a corresponding decline in democratic values. Few if any countries are immune to the growing threat to freedom of expression, and even in supposed safe zones there is cause for concern.

Between June 2023 and June 2025, Cartooning for Peace recorded eighty-seven cases of threats against cartoonists around the world. The types of attacks recorded reveal a predominance of legal proceedings and cases of censorship. This typology indicates that more insidious repressive mechanisms are developing, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship, while circumventing the international attention attracted by more obvious, physical repression.

Over the past two years, Cartooning for Peace has recorded twenty-two cases of legal proceedings² brought against cartoonists in several countries, including Türkiye, India, Malaysia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. In addition, there have been fourteen cases of censorship targeting cartoonists, taking various forms: editorial censorship, political censorship, etc.

² According to the definition used in the classification set out on page 4.

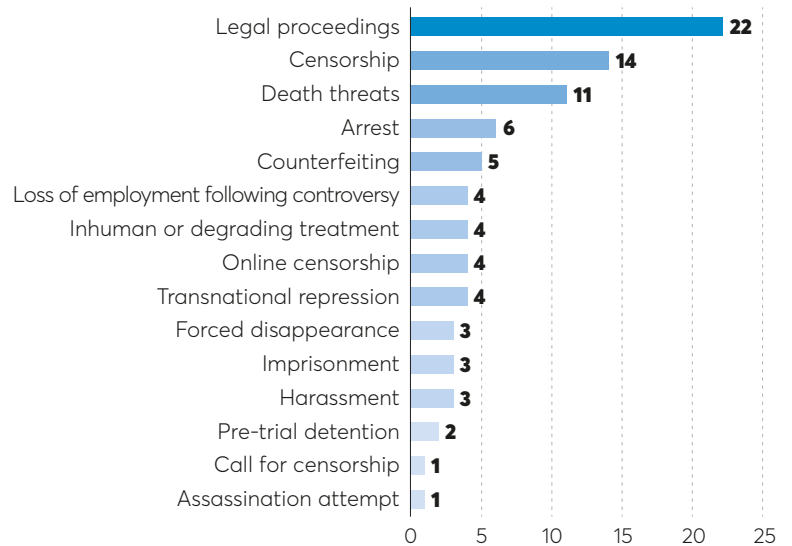
In India, the authorities criminalise and censor critical positions by relying on new information legislation, which is used to silence journalists, cartoonists, human rights defenders, and anyone expressing criticism of the authorities. More and more cartoonists are subjected to judicial proceedings that instrumentalise repressive laws – often those ostensibly addressing cybercrime, dis- and misinformation, sedition, extremism and/or terrorism – in an attempt to censor them.

In Egypt, pre-trial detention is becoming a new weapon used by the regime to muzzle those who report and debate, through the abuse of anti-terrorism laws.

Türkiye is not spared from the growing criminalisation of the media and journalists. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made clear his desire to silence all dissenting voices, and political cartoonists are being directly targeted.

While we are sadly familiar with the list of regimes long-known to be most repressive (Russia, China, Uganda, Nicaragua, etc.), others are shifting towards what some political scientists refer to as ‘competitive authoritarianism’. These hybrid regimes are characterised by the coexistence of democratic institutions and authoritarian practices that violate democratic rules (Türkiye, Hungary, India, the United States, Israel, etc.).

Typology of the recorded threats



On the African continent, cartoonists are increasingly seen less as commentators and more as activists, with political leaders perceiving the visual codes of editorial cartoons as incorporating forms of mobilisation. As youth social movements organise themselves online, cartoons often become rallying symbols, making cartoonists early and visible targets of repression.



◀ Kichka (Israël)
 "Autocratic democrat – Dictator – Former democrat – So-called democrat"

► Niels Bo Bojesen (Denmark)

Such dynamics mean that freedom of expression cannot be guaranteed without vigilance, and in many countries this is a constant challenge. Cartooning for Peace observes a tendency to exploit this freedom, exacerbating the polarisation in public debate. This polarisation, which takes various forms, is always detrimental to respect for human rights, and particularly freedom of expression.

This trend is particularly evident in the United States, where the political establishment has made freedom of expression a central battleground. The Trump administration challenges the legitimacy of journalists and condemns works and content that do not fit with the president's ideological narrative. This drift can lead to the imposition of censorship and political pressure on cultural institutions and representatives of the press. Reporters Without Borders notes that since the beginning of his second term, Donald Trump has stepped up his attacks on the news media, notably through legal proceedings and the (threatened) closure of outlets.

Furthermore, preventive censorship is evident within certain US newspaper editorial offices. A recent example is Jeff Bezos's interference in the editorial line of the *Washington Post*, which caused concern and led to the resignation of several journalists, including cartoonist Ann Telnaes, following the refusal to publish one of her cartoons because of its critical message towards the businessman³.

▼ Nardi (Italy)



In light of recent developments – decline in print media, the challenges of revenue and access in the peak of the digital age – cartoonists have adapted to new and emerging media. According to the results from the survey on online censorship, participating cartoonists are very active on social media⁴ and a clear majority publish cartoons daily or weekly on the Internet. This online visibility exposes them to threats that are unprecedented in their form and scale, which are only growing: censorship, online hate, shadow banning, harassment, trolling, etc. Female cartoonists are victims of gender-based digital violence; contributors identified as women are more exposed to sexist insults and particularly recurrent and virulent misogynistic comments, especially on social media.

The main digital platforms are owned by the powerful GAFAM⁵ multinationals, now serious political players in a context where information has become a means not only to exert influence, but domination. The political convictions of these owners shape the governance, policies, and the algorithms that drive social networks.

In the results of the survey on online censorship, 43% of the cartoonists said at least one of their cartoons had been removed from a platform. The most common reasons given for this removal were political content.

3 See the cartoon on page 28 – “United States: censorship and threats to freedom of expression.”

4 Academic research on the online experience of press cartoonists as part of the project “Spotlight on the situation of press cartoonists around the world” supported by UNESCO’s Global Fund for Media Defense (GMDF) and the CFC.

5 Acronym referring to the web giants: Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft.

Spotlight cartoonists in the 2020-2022 report

Cartoonists featured in our last report have seen further developments in their cases, while others have stalled:

- Fearing for his safety in the long term, Emad Hajjaj (Jordan) sought refuge in the USA, entering prior to the new Trump administration.
- Newspaper *Népszava* and Gábor Pápai (Hungary) await a hearing of their case before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) after the supreme court in Budapest ruled they were guilty of violating a parliamentarian's "human dignity in the context of his membership of a Christian religious community" in 2022.
- Likewise, Rachita Taneja (India) has yet to receive a final ruling from the supreme court on her accusations of "insulting" their institution; in the meantime, she received the Freedom Cartoonists Foundation's Kofi Annan Courage in Cartooning Award in 2024, along with Zunzi (Hong Kong).
- Fami Reza (Malaysia) continues to be harassed by police and judiciary, most recently detained for questioning in December 2024 and prevented from leaving the country in June 2025.
- Zehra Ömeroğlu (Türkiye) was acquitted of criminal "obscenity" in June 2025, although prosecutors moved swiftly to appeal. In the same year she received Cartoonists Rights' Robert Russell Courage in Cartooning Award.
- Cristina (Portugal) was cleared of all charges in 2025 after a complaint was lodged against her by a Portuguese police union in 2023 because of an animated cartoon referring to police violence, broadcast on RTP1's *Spam Cartoon* programme, recently discontinued.
- Nik Titanik (Croatia) is awaiting an appeal hearing after winning his court case in first instance on June 16th, 2025 against Krešimir Antolić, former head of the GNK Dinamo football club, who sued him over three cartoons published in Sports newspaper *24sata* in 2020 and deemed insulting. Krešimir Antolić also sued *24sata*, a case he won in first instance in February 2023.



▲ Dlog (Tunisia)

The development of transnational threats, with foreign interference spreading propaganda and manipulating information to cause harm, is particularly worrying. On social media, some pro-Russian accounts regularly spread fake newspaper headlines, including political cartoons, misusing information for political purposes.

New technologies pose ethical and legal challenges, most especially artificial intelligence. The livelihood of cartoonists has not been spared from the emergence of these new tools, which require a defined and protective legislative framework.

Other threats loom over cartoonists, who are seeing their professional opportunities in traditional media dwindle. Economic pressures shaking the world of journalism are making space for cartoonists increasingly scarce. Over the past two years, several long-standing collaborations have ended citing financial constraints.

It is at times hard to see how editorial and political cartoons will go on, and yet cartoonists are resisting, continuing to make their voices heard via their pencils. In a polarised and fragile world buffeted by the winds of extremism and disinformation, it is becoming ever more urgent for everyone to mobilise in defence of democratic values, and in particular freedom of expression.

Charlie Hebdo: updates on the threat 10 years on

Riss, cartoonist and editor-in-chief of *Charlie Hebdo*

“ It’s difficult to assess the real situation concerning dangers facing cartoonists, as they come in many shapes and colours, taking different approaches to current affairs and publishing their work in newspapers with highly diverse editorial lines. However, since the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015, when several of its cartoonists were killed, it’s become clear that all cartoonists may one day be subject to threats.

Protests on social media against controversial caricatures are part of life for satirical publications, and *Charlie Hebdo* has long been accustomed to them. Some cartoonists are unprepared to deal with such hostility or hatred, however. It takes a lot of guts to be a satirical cartoonist today. It’s no longer enough to have talent and ideas; you also need the strength to defend your ideas and to stomach being insulted and vilified by thousands of Internet users.

Since 2015, threats have become commonplace. Today, they are posted daily on social media and target public figures from all walks of life, whether political, cultural or economic. Most of the time, they are merely an expression of anger and are not intended to lead to an actual attack. *Charlie Hebdo* recently filed a complaint against a newsagent who refused to display a cover of the paper, saying that it would be no surprise if another attack occurred. When questioned by the police, he immediately toned down his comments, explaining that they were an expression of his anger. But threats of this kind, even if they don’t lead to acts of violence, can be prosecuted for condoning acts of terrorism. This is something that many who make such threats on social media are unaware of. It is therefore important to systematically file complaints, if only to make those making such remarks aware of the seriousness of their words and to hold them accountable.



Hardened terrorists don’t use social media to make threats before carrying out their acts. This is more how isolated individuals act, who are capable of violence with weapons that are easily available on the market. This was the case in 2020 in front of the former *Charlie Hebdo* offices on Rue Nicolas Appert, where employees of a company were attacked during their break and seriously injured by a lone individual using a butcher’s knife.

▲ Darío (Mexico)



◀ Fake cover of *Charlie Hebdo*
 "You have to be crazy to do what we do – In Israel, people get high to forget about the war – The people want it, but their leaders don't – An obstacle course to return home – What would the reopening of Notre-Dame Cathedral be without a hunchback?"

In 2025, some *Charlie Hebdo* employees are still under police protection. The situation is both reassuring and restrictive. It's reassuring as journalists are less worried about security issues since the police keep an eye on them, allowing them to focus on their work. The downside is that the police presence makes the protected journalist's movements less discreet and may discourage people from otherwise agreeing to be interviewed on sensitive subjects. This is especially true when reporting abroad, where police escorts mean having to report to local authorities, potentially causing problems in countries that don't share the same democratic values as France.

Despite these constraints, we should recognise that we are fortunate to live in a country where the public authorities take protecting journalists and cartoonists seriously. This is not the case in every country. *Charlie Hebdo's* relations with the authorities have always been good and the police have always looked out for the paper.

Another potential type of threat is one that can come from foreign countries and governments, such as Iran, whose leaders have often been caricatured by *Charlie Hebdo*. It's not outside the realms of possibility to imagine that states which have always used terrorism to further their policies might one day consider doing so against a satirical newspaper.

On a different note, it is worth remembering that internet users in the pay of Russia have been circulating fake covers of *Charlie Hebdo* caricaturing Ukrainians and their president Zelenskyy for months. The fake news technique therefore also exists in cartoons and has been used to the detriment of *Charlie Hebdo*, whose image has been hijacked to serve Kremlin propaganda.

For all these reasons, vigilance remains high at *Charlie Hebdo*. Unease is widespread, with other media outlets being the target of threats, such as the *Bfmtv* channel, which recently had to temporarily close its premises following a bomb scare. Some newspapers and TV channels now have security systems to counter terrorist attacks. Since it began publishing once again in 2015, *Charlie Hebdo* has assimilated the threat and equipped its premises with substantial security measures, mainly to reassure its employees so they feel completely safe. Today, threats are affecting other forms of expression besides cartoons, and all media outlets could be the target of a terrorist attack.

▼ Soulcie (France)
 "Charlie republishes the Muhammad cartoons – Don't let them pay you to do nothing."

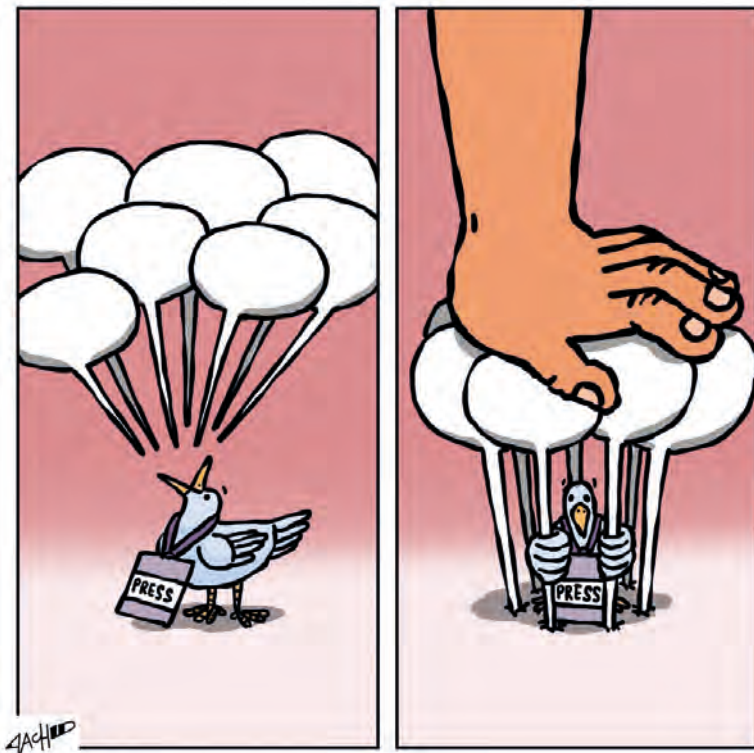
Obviously, this situation should not exist, and we sometimes regret the days when we could report from around the world anonymously and without worrying. For *Charlie Hebdo*, those days are gone. Now, we have to look at the situation in each country carefully before going there to report, even if it means sometimes renouncing the trip for security reasons.”

«CHARLIE» REPUBLIE LES CARICATURES DE MAHOMET



Open repression and hidden hands in Asia

Cherian George, professor of media studies at Hong Kong Baptist University



▲ Zach (Philippines)

“Asia’s cartoonists face prosecution, harassment, bans, and economic threats to their livelihoods, for work that challenges authority or offends people’s sensibilities. The world’s largest continent has very few liberal democracies with strong protections for freedom of expression. Asia has an extremely diverse range of authoritarian settings, from one-party autocratic regimes such as China and Vietnam, military junta-ruled states such as Myanmar, and many seemingly democratic systems with restricted civil liberties.

In many cases, the situation is worsening; the world’s most populous country, India, has been transitioning into an ethnonationalist electoral autocracy. In 2025, the online magazine

Vikatan.com was blocked on government orders for more than two weeks because of a cartoon it claimed endangered India’s sovereignty and its foreign relations. The cartoon depicted Prime Minister Narendra Modi in chains, seated next to United States President Donald Trump; it was a comment on the government’s inaction when its citizens were deported from the US in handcuffs. A court ordered the site unblocked after it removed the cartoon.

Cartoonist Rachita Taneja, creator of the progressive *Sanitary Panels* webcomic, faced criminal contempt of court proceedings in 2020 for mocking a Supreme Court ruling that many criticised as partial to pro-government media. Five years later, she had yet to get a hearing date. As often happens, her case is in limbo, hanging like a Sword of Damocles above the cartoonist and chilling speech.

In Malaysia, Fahmi Reza has been investigated under the Sedition Act multiple times, most recently in 2025, for caricaturing rulers as part of his long-running campaign against corruption. Such legal actions recur even as Malaysia has improved its media freedom and democracy ratings under a government that has been slow to deliver on its promise to repeal draconian laws.

While legal threats from the state persist across Asia, the arrest and prosecution of cartoonists is not the routine form of cartoon censorship. Most provocative cartoons germinating in an artist’s imagination never see the light of day because of rampant self-censorship. The memory of harsh state actions — not only against cartoonists but also other journalists, stand-up comedians, and other critical voices — is usually enough to deter most from testing political limits.

When cartoonists wish to proceed nonetheless, they often find that political obstacles have shifted upstream. Gatekeepers in media and other venues respond to explicit and implicit government signals, blocking the release of critical cartoons.

In Hong Kong in 2023, the major newspaper *Ming Pao* terminated two strips by the city's best-known political cartoonist, Wong Kei-kwan ("Zunzi"), after repeated official complaints about his work. A government minister hailed the newspaper's decision to end its four-decade relationship with the cartoonist as "a responsible decision" to remove "non-factual" and "misleading" smears against the government. Zunzi's books subsequently disappeared from public libraries.

Internet platform companies are another avenue for censorship by proxy. In 2024 and 2025, Indian authorities have written several times to X claiming that cartoonists such as Manjul and Satish Acharya had violated the law with their cartoons. While X did not take action, such complaints can have spillover effects. Manjul stated that these notifications "have a dissuasive effect on freedom of expression and journalism, which fosters an environment of self-censorship." In 2021, Manjul was dropped by *Network18*, days after the authorities sent a complaint to Twitter.

In many cases, it is difficult to tell where legitimate editorial prerogatives end and political compliance begins. The highly respected *Philippine Daily Inquirer* newspaper and then

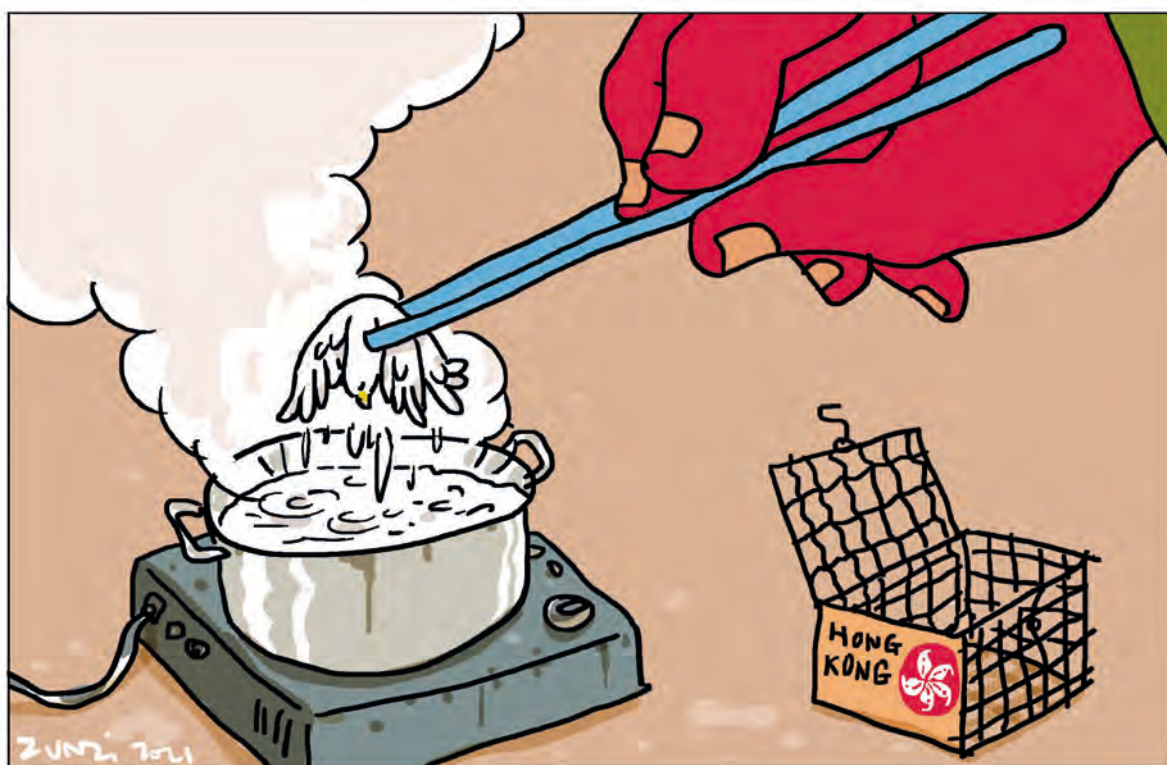
the *Philippine Star* scrapped their editorial cartoon op-ed spaces in 2022. It was unclear if this was purely for cost-cutting or also to manage political risk under the country's authoritarian populist regimes. In May 2025, journalist Rigoberto D. Tiglao published an article in the *Manila Times* in which he accused cartoonists Steven Pabalinas and Manny Francisco of spreading false information and anti-Chinese cartoons.

There are many red lines that must not be crossed, whether they come from the State or society.

With newspaper companies becoming less hospitable to editorial cartoons, Asian artists have moved to smaller outlets online or their own social media channels. While the Internet is the lifeblood of many, it is not free of censorship. Inside China's national Internet, platform companies aggressively filter images as well as texts that officials would not approve of; their creators may lose access temporarily or permanently, which creates a strong incentive to stay well within the red lines.

Even in countries plugged into more open global networks and platforms, technology companies are known to have cooperated with governments and other powerful actors to effect censorship. Furthermore, in several Asian jurisdictions, criminal laws covering cyberspace are more sweeping than older equivalent statutes enacted for traditional media.

► Zunzi
(Hong Kong)





▲ Stellina (Taiwan)

The impulse to censor is not the monopoly of state actors who find cartoons threatening to their political or economic power. In Asia, it is often triggered by perceived offence to people’s religious, ethnic and national feelings. Religion is an especially powerful force, because of its centrality to many Asians’ identities. When religious loyalties are weaponised for mass mobilisation, the result tends to be an uncompromising and even violent intolerance.

Although experienced political cartoonists are mindful of this minefield, it is difficult to avoid the topic of religion completely, given its major role in politics and public affairs. It is also hard to predict what offence-takers will decide to

target and how the authorities will respond. In 2025, cartoonist Hemant Malviya spent several weeks in police custody for, among other alleged crimes, outraging Hindus’ feelings — even though the offending words were in a caption inserted by a reader, and not in the cartoonist’s original cartoon posted four years earlier. Malviya had shared the reader’s version. The Supreme Court granted his bail request only after he agreed to take down the cartoon and apologise.

In Singapore, the Government banned sale of the scholarly book *Red Lines: Political Cartoons and the Struggle Against Censorship* for reproducing cartoons judged to have denigrated various religions. These included, surprisingly, pieces by female cartoonists criticising the Hindu Right’s indifference toward rape in India, and sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests in South America.

A more recent trend is the extraterritorial reach of China’s cartoon censorship. In 2023, Chinese embassy officials tried unsuccessfully to persuade a Warsaw art centre to cancel an exhibition by the dissident cartoonist and artist Badiucao, exiled in Australia. In 2024, an online campaign of harassment and death threats targeted him ahead of China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi’s scheduled visit to Australia. Cartoonists have been among the overseas dissidents that the government has pursued and attempted to extradite. ”

The situation of exiled Afghan cartoonists

In the concluding chapters of *Cartoonists on the Line* (2023), we warned of increasing numbers of displaced cartoonists, including from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, scene of an abject failure of the international community to uphold its commitments to human rights and the needs of victims.

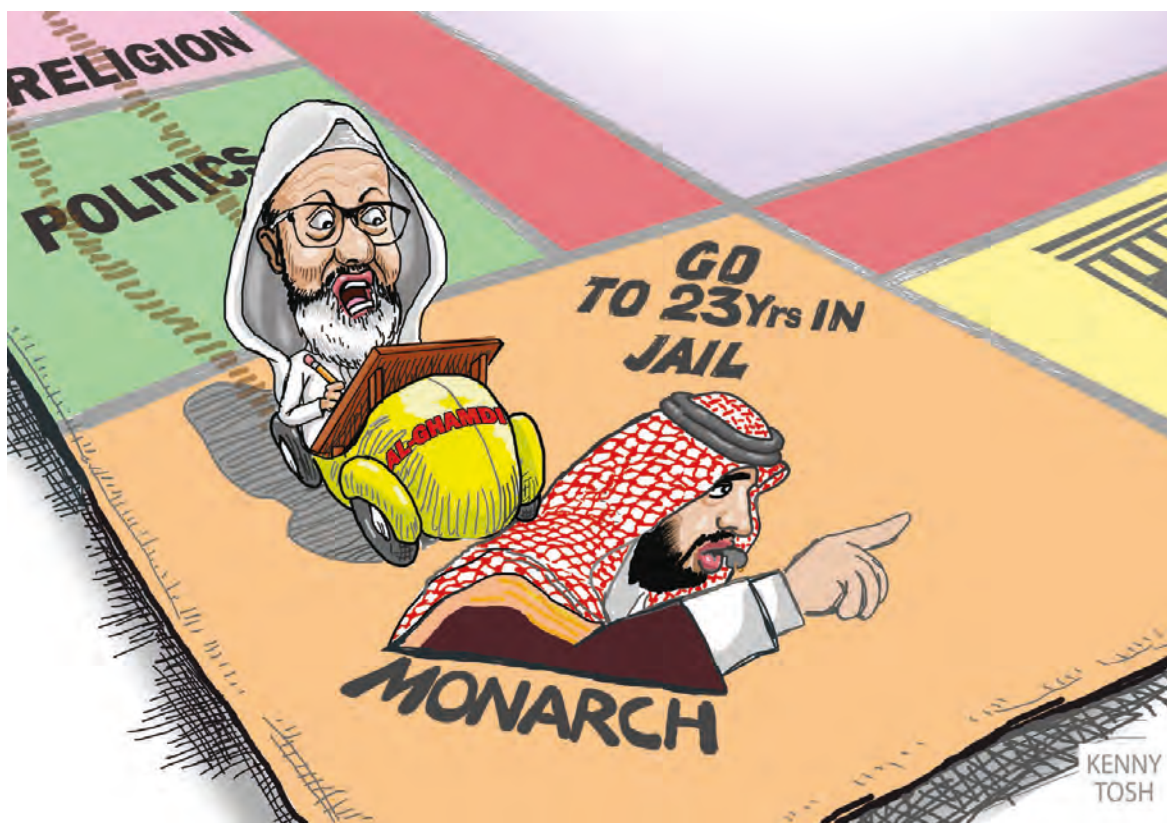
Since the Islamic Republic’s fall in 2021 we have been briefed on a dozen Afghan cartoonists seeking aid; more than any other country over the period. Many reported having been named in Taliban-issued lists of targets and some were the victims of violence. Of these petitioners, half were successfully relocated via multi-agency efforts to territories that can be considered safe.

The rest either remain in hiding within Afghanistan or are in neighbouring countries likely to deport them at short notice.

Any further work has been stymied by the USA’s total withdrawal from assistance to all refugees and a travel ban targeting Afghans among other nationalities; the UK scandal over leaked data and their subsequent secret relocation of several thousand Afghans, leading to a cessation of aid; and the fatigue in evidence across multiple over-subscribed and under-funded agencies and NGOs attempting to deal not only with Afghanistan but also crises in Myanmar, Sudan, Ukraine, and the coming fallout of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.



▲ Hossein Rezaye (Afghanistan)



The Middle East: caricature in the face of absurd violence

Jonathan Dagher, head of the Middle East desk at Reporters Without Borders

“ In the Middle East, the absurdity is sometimes beyond words. Take Saudi Arabia, for instance: in 2018, the kingdom arrested cartoonist Mohammed Al Ghamdi, known by his pen name Mohammed Al Hazza, for publishing cartoons in the Qatari newspaper *Lusail*. The Saudi regime accused him, among other things, of “sympathising with Qatar”. At the time, the emirate was subject to an economic embargo imposed by Saudi Arabia. The crisis has since been resolved, however. Not only was the blockade lifted in 2021, but the two countries also signed cooperation agreements in 2025, sealing relations that are now stronger than ever. Yet in January 2025, the kingdom decided to extend Mohammed’s

imprisonment, stretching his total sentence to twenty-three years in prison.

This, of course, is entirely unjust: depriving a man of his freedom for drawing a picture. But it is also absurd, since the charges against him, already highly fallacious, have now been emptied of their substance. Yet, as many cartoonists know, injustice and absurdity often go hand in hand. The abolition of logic and reason is often the corollary to the abolition of freedom. That is why propaganda, particularly in the Middle East, frequently aims to “complexify” the narrative and justify repression. Editorial and political cartoonists are an antidote to this complexity. With a few strokes of the pen, sometimes a few colours, they challenge the authoritarian

regimes that saturate the public space with their narratives.

Cartoonists are resisting, however. In Gaza, for instance, political cartoons drawn by Palestinian cartoonists, which they manage to distribute internationally, counteract the Israeli government's propaganda that seeks to obscure basic facts and repress the work of anyone who can provide evidence of an ongoing genocide. Day and night, disinformation and violence by the Israeli army hamper the work of journalists in the enclave. Almost 220 of them have been killed in the past two years, including at least 67 in the course of their work, as Reporters Without Borders was able to demonstrate. In October 2024, Palestinian cartoonist Mahasen al-Kha-



◀ Safaa Odah (Gaza)

teeb was killed in an Israeli army bombing raid. With a few strokes of her pencil, cartoonist Safaa Odah was able to pierce the "complexity" fabricated by Israeli propaganda. Her drawing of a child trying to stop the shadow of a missile hurtling towards his open window with his hand says it all: "The children of Gaza are terrified and defenceless." It's simple. It's obvious.

But like her fellow cartoonists on the ground, Safaa Odah herself is being punished by the absurdity of the violence she depicts: starved, forcibly displaced, she remains a prisoner in an area cut off from the world for over two years. Despite the blockade, her cartoon restores reason to the international community at a time when Netanyahu's government is seeking to portray the victims as aggressors.

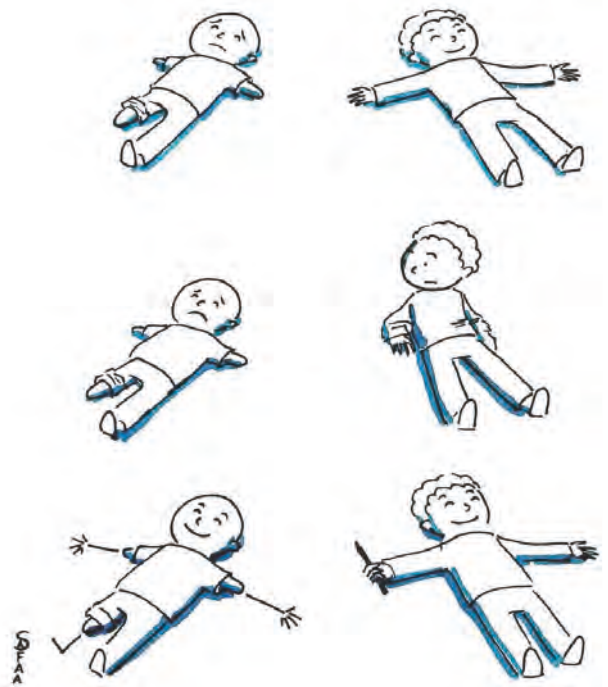
Cartoonists are intimately acquainted with these reversals of meaning. Ashraf Omar, for instance, is not a "terrorist", he's a cartoonist for the independent Egyptian media outlet *Al Manassa*. One of his latest cartoons shows a man pouring fuel on the fire of the Egyptian debt crisis in 2024, surprised that the fire was not going out. A few hours after its publication, he was arrested by Egyptian security forces and charged, without trial, with "belonging to a terrorist organisation". Once again, absurdity reigns: Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's dictatorship, which continues to hold him in detention to this day, based its legitimacy on the Rabaa massacre – the deadliest attack on civilians in Egypt's recent history. To date, 20 journal-

Safaa Odah, cartooning under the bombs

Palestinian cartoonist Safaa Odah, originally from Rafah, lives in a refugee camp in Khan Younis. Like more than 2 million Gazans since October 7th, 2023, Safaa has had to move several times, her home near Rafah having been completely destroyed. Her situation reflects the tragedy experienced by Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip. Today, Safaa Odah draws on walls amid the ruins and on her tent, the only places still standing where she can convey the surrounding chaos through her art.

Safaa Odah is a member of the Palestinian Fine Artists Association. She has taken part in

numerous international cartoons competitions as both a nominee and a panel member. Safaa Odah publishes her cartoons on social media, as well as in the Italian magazine *Erbacce* and on the *Visual Arts Magazine* website. Her work focuses on the realities of Gazans living in the Gaza Strip. She has completed several artistic projects, such as visual content on women's empowerment and comic strips for children. In April 2025, in collaboration with renowned Palestinian cartoonist Mohammad Saba'aneh, the Lakes International Comic Art Festival published Safaa's diary illustrated with her cartoons, entitled *Safaa and the Tent*.



▲ Safaa Odah (Gaza)



◀ Emad Hajjaj (Jordan)

Al Hazza, sentenced to 23 years in prison

In mid-October 2024 the release had been expected of Saudi cartoonist Mohammed Al Ghamdi, known by the pen-name Mohammed Al Hazza and previously engaged by the Qatar-based newspaper *Lusail* newspaper.

In 2018 the cartoonist had been detained and criminally prosecuted after his work had been published in *Lusail* during the preceding year, amid an economic embargo.



◀ Hector (France)

Toward the end of his six-year sentence, a secret trial took place which led to a wholly unanticipated extension to a total of twenty-three, with no option to appeal, and despite the intervening normalisation of relations between the two nations. International observers noted the charges included the expression of "sympathy for Qatar" and one-hundred cartoons that "insulted the kingdom" of Saudi Arabia.

While longer potential sentences have been threatened in other cases and over diverse criminal allegations (sedition, terrorism etc) the authors are unaware of any officially criminalised cartoonist that has faced a longer period in prison on charges directly pertaining to their cartoons.

ists are being arbitrarily detained by the regime because of their profession.

Why are dictators and war criminals so afraid of cartoonists? Why did cartoonist Emad Hajjaj receive threats in Jordan in 2023 for his cartoons about Gaza? Why is the Iranian regime persecuting cartoonist Atena Farghadani, who was arrested, assaulted and threatened in 2024 for a simple cartoon? For the same reason, no doubt, that they fear journalists: because their work cuts through the complexity and reveals simple truths. Because their art informs.

But there's another reason. For decades in Syria under the Assad regime, depicting the dictator was forbidden. One day, Ali Ferzat, an iconic Syrian cartoonist, well aware of the absurdity of this decree, drew Bashar al-Assad for the first time. It was shortly after the start of the Arab Spring in 2011. One night, as he left his office, he was followed by a group of men who blindfolded him, tied him up, and then beat him unconscious. "Break his hands so he can never draw again," he heard them say. Ali Ferzat continued to draw, including after the dictator's fall in 2024. He knows that cartoonists are feared because they can destroy icons. They strip them of their divine aura and give people permission to mock them. "We bridge the gap between fear and hope," Ali Ferzat said in an interview published by *The Guardian* in 2014. In



◀ Faro (France)
"What an honour to shake hands with Ali Ferzazt – Ouch!"

Atena Farghadani, released after 8 months in prison



Visual artist Atena Farghadani was seized and beaten on April 13th, 2024 after she attempted to place a poster of one of her cartoons on Pasteur Street, Tehran. This was an act of protest after being told that travelling to Oslo in order to attend a showing of her paintings at that year's Freedom Forum would lead to her immediate arrest.

She was later charged with crimes related to insulting religious sensibilities and propaganda against the state, and handed a six-year sentence. At the end of the year these charges were reduced and with it the sentence, a mere eight months. Hence, she was released on December 10th, 2024.

This incident marked her second criminal trial and the third time Farghadani has been brutalised by the state while imprisoned for her art. In 2015/16 she was held for eighteen months. During this time, she was severely abused; subjected to virginity and pregnancy tests against her will, practices that are designated torture by international human rights standards. She spent a period on hunger strike and suffered a heart attack. Then, during a brief period in jail in 2023 she alleges an attempted poisoning and again was hospitalised after resorting to hunger strike and being denied basic amenities.

Ashraf Omar, still in detention

Cartoonist, translator, and contributor to the *Al Manassa* independent news outlet Ashraf Omar was taken from his home in Cairo on July 22nd, 2024, his whereabouts unconfirmed for the following two days. Plain police clothes officers had taken him to a station where he was subjected to a six-hour interrogation as well as physical and verbal abuse. Questioned about the content and intent of his cartoons, he was ultimately charged with "joining a terrorist group while being aware of its purposes, disseminating and publishing rumours and fake news, and abuse of social media."

Thereafter Ashraf Omar entered a cyclical period of "pre-trial detention" with brief hearings conducted via video conference every fifteen, later every forty-five days. Said hearings are a hold-over from the pandemic period when court business could not be conducted in person; they allow for no contact between defendant and counsel and have been widely criticised by international human right monitors. The law allows for this period of detention to last as long as eighteen months.

On January 16th, 2025, his wife Nada Mougheeth was arrested and charged with "spreading false rumours" about his arrest and, like him, "supporting terrorism". She was later released on bail. At the date of publication Ashraf Omar still had no trial date, but it is expected to take place in 2026.

◀ Mana Neyestani (Iran)

▼ Ramsés (Cuba)



Africa: satire as a political challenge

Patrick Gathara, Kenyan journalist, cartoonist and author

“ Over the past two years, cartoonists across East and Southern Africa have faced an increasingly hostile environment, marked by enforced disappearances, threats, smear campaigns, professional sanctions, and in some cases, suspicious deaths. Together, these incidents reveal a broader pattern: satire is being reinterpreted as political mobilisation, and cartoonists are being treated less as artists and more as perceived threats to power.

It is important at the outset to understand that across the continent, there has been a proliferation of online news outlets with some opening up spaces for cartoonists even as opportunities in more established legacy newspapers have stagnated or evaporated. Further, many cartoonists have also been able to utilise social media as a medium of distribution, including through the creation of memes on social media.

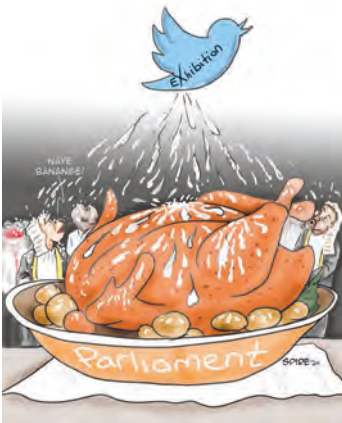
In Kenya, the December 2024 disappearance of digital cartoonist Gideon “Kibet Bull” Kibet marked a dangerous escalation in the state’s response to online dissent. Known for his viral silhouette caricatures of President William Ruto and his administration, Kibet vanished alongside his brother after meeting an opposition senator. His release in early January 2025 came with no official explanation and no meaningful investigation. His case fits a broader pattern of abductions targeting online influencers during a period of heightened political tension. The signal is unmistakable: digital satire, even when produced by independent creators outside traditional media, is now treated as a form of political activism that can trigger clandestine repression.

In Uganda, the case of Jimmy Spire Ssentongo illustrates how cartoonists increasingly occupy hybrid roles as artists, academics, entertainers and civic mobilisers. Ssentongo’s



#UgandaParliamentExhibition campaign, a crowdsourced exposé of corruption in Parliament which built on similar online campaigns highlighting decaying infrastructure and services in Uganda, reached millions online, prompting threats, surveillance concerns, and coordinated backlash from political actors. His recognition with the 2024 EU Human Rights Defenders Award and the 2024 Anti-Corruption Champions Award from the US Department of State underscored both his influence and vulnerability. His experience demonstrates how cartoonists who cross into digital activism face layered risks: personal threats, reputational attacks, and the politicisation of their professional standing.

▲ Glez
(Burkina Faso)



intimidation - carried out through professional bodies rather than security agencies - represents a growing category of “soft repression,” one that chills expression without relying on arrests or violence. That is not to say that Tanzanian cartoonists don’t face the risks of state-sponsored action. In October 2024, three online news outlets, the *Citizen*, *Mwananchi* and *Mwanaspoti* in the country were suspended for 30 days for publishing cartoons deemed critical of President Suluhu. This is also designed to generate a chilling effect on cartoonists.

◀ Jimmy Spire
Ssentongo
(Uganda)
“The heck!”

The 2024 death of Congolese cartoonist Yves Kulondwa “Kayene” in Rusizi, Rwanda remains shrouded in uncertainty. Kayene had earlier faced hostility in the DRC for his environmental and anti-corruption activism, and his relocation did not provide the safety he sought. His case highlights the precarity of cartoonists working across borders in a region where protection frameworks for at-risk artists remain weak, informal, and unreliable.

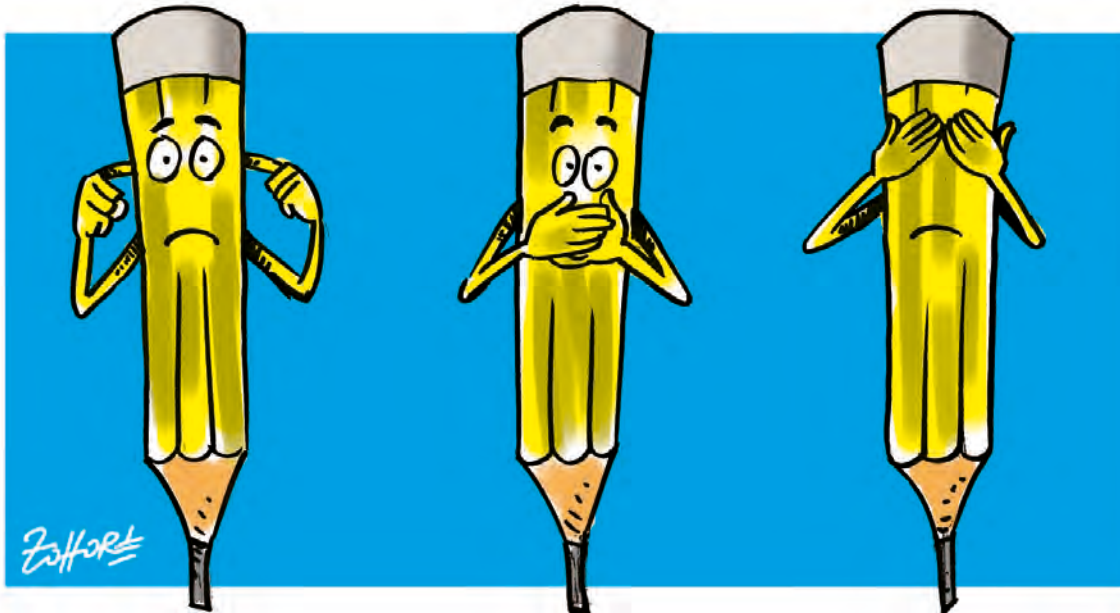
Political cartoons have become one of the few channels for sharp critique, which in turn makes practitioners high-risk actors.

A related but distinct form of pressure is visible in Tanzania. In July 2025, Tanzania Editors Forum chairman Deodatus Balile publicly attacked a cartoon by Masoud Kipanya that depicted the media as toilet paper. Balile described the cartoon as “a disgraceful habit” and suggested that authorities should investigate whether those producing such images were legitimate journalists or “agents.” This kind of institutional

In Zimbabwe, cartoonists navigate a longstanding environment of state surveillance, constrained media space, and politicised regulation. Political cartoons have become one of the few channels for sharp critique, which in turn makes practitioners high-risk actors. Many work with minimal protection, sometimes anonymously, as legal and bureaucratic tools are readily deployed to punish dissent. Cartoons likening past and present autocrats, for example, have drawn threats and political retaliation, underscoring how satire is interpreted not as commentary but as subversion.



◀ Zapiro
(South Africa)



◀ Zohoré
(Republic of
Côte d'Ivoire)

In South Africa, legal and institutional pressures form the primary threat. The country's more robust protections for free expression mean cartoonists are less likely to face violence, but they remain vulnerable to defamation suits, political intimidation, editorial caution, and manufactured public outrage. High-profile cases involving Zapiro demonstrate how powerful actors weaponise legal processes and commercial pressure to limit the scope of critical satire. South Africa shows that even in relatively open environments, cartoonists remain exposed to non-violent but potent forms of censorship.

Cartoonists on the African continent face a tightening landscape of risk.

From East to Southern Africa cartoonists operate in an environment where satire is not just regarded as political expression, but as political challenge. As a result, whether through enforced disappearance, institutional intimidation, legal pressure, or online harassment, cartoonists face a tightening landscape of risk. For organisations such as Cartoonists Rights Network International and Cartooning for Peace, the challenge is to strengthen rapid-response support, expand cross-border protection pathways, and advocate for recognition of cartoonists as essential though increasingly endangered contributors to public life. ”

Continental trends

Across the African continent, three major trends define this evolving landscape:

1 Cartoonists are increasingly treated as political actors.

From Kenya to Nigeria to Zimbabwe, visual satire is widely viewed by political elites as a form of mobilisation rather than commentary. As youth movements organise online, cartoons often become rallying symbols making cartoonists early and visible targets of repression.

2 “Soft censorship” is expanding faster than overt violence.

While abductions and threats persist, governments and institutions are more frequently turning to bureaucratic and reputational tools:

- accreditation threats
- investigations by professional bodies
- newspaper bans and suspensions
- defamation suits
- online smear campaigns
- expansive interpretations of “insult” or “cybercrime” laws

These quieter mechanisms of control create an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship while avoiding the international scrutiny triggered by physical repression.

3 Digital platforms have intensified both reach and risk.

Most African cartoonists now publish primarily on social media, bypassing traditional editorial gatekeepers but also exposing themselves directly to state surveillance, bot-led harassment, and political monitoring. Virality brings influence but also vulnerability.

Europe is not immune to global trends

Emanuele del Rosso (Italy), editorial

cartoonist and member of Cartooning for Peace



“ Taking a look around the world, one gets the sense that the state of press freedom and free speech is quite bleak. Almost everywhere, media workers are having a difficult time. And indeed, Reporters Without Borders marks the situation for journalists as “difficult” or “very serious” in over half of the world’s countries, and satisfactory in fewer than one in four.

One might be tempted to think Europe is surely an exception, it must be a safe haven for political cartoonists; a place where they can do their work freely and undisturbed, as opposed to

areas of the world where authoritarian governments or totalitarian regimes quash freedom of expression.

On the one hand, European states have an obligation to uphold human rights and freedom of expression, ensuring that individuals can debate freely in the public square without fear of the legalities. Cartoonists in many of these countries draw editorial and political cartoons without hindrance and under the protection of the rule of law.

▲ Kazanevsky (Ukraine)

And on the other hand, the Council of Europe highlights a growing trend of disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression, and the list of countries where press freedom is deemed “problematic” or “difficult” according to Reporters Without Borders’ 2025 barometer amounts to more than 15 states, including countries such as Italy, Hungary, Serbia, Russia, Belarus, and Türkiye. In its 2025 report, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), recorded 10 murders of journalists in Europe: eight in Ukraine, one in Russia, and one in Türkiye. “This is the third time in ten years that Europe has seen such a high level of violence, first in 2015 with the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in France, then in 2022 after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.”

While – thankfully – no case of physical violence has been recorded over the period covered by this report, it is to be noted that cartoonists are confronted with private lawsuits, public prosecutions, and may also be exposed to SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) suits which are intended to censor, intimidate and silence critics, by burdening them with the costs of a legal defence until they abandon their criticism or opposition.

The Council of Europe has released a new Guide aimed at limiting the use of criminal law to restrict freedom of expression and which provides an overview of the European Court of Human Rights’ case-law, “highlighting the risks posed when criminal sanctions are used to suppress free speech and choke off plurality

of opinions. While acknowledging that some forms of speech – such as incitement to violence or hate speech – may justifiably be criminalised, the guide demonstrates that applying criminal law to less harmful expressions can have a chilling effect. Putting others off from expressing themselves silences the critical, dissenting or unpopular voices that are vital to healthy democracy.”

The most severe case over the period is probably the police raid that took place at the offices of the Turkish satirical magazine *LeMan*. On June 26th, 2025, *LeMan* published a cartoon by Doğan Pelevan concerning Gaza and depicting the souls of a deceased Muslim named Mohammed and a Jew named Moses.

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are hard-fought rights, which must continue to be defended in Europe.

In our view, the authorities wilfully misrepresented the cartoon as an image depicting the Prophet Mohammed. Violent protests followed, targeting *LeMan*’s Istanbul office and a local bar frequented by the staff. Then, police proceeded to arrest four staff members of the magazine – among them, Pelevan, the author of the cartoon. Aslan Özdemir, editor-in-chief of *LeMan*, was arrested at Istanbul Airport on July 11th, 2025. Such arrests were made with the accusation of “inciting hatred” and, in the case of Pelevan,



▲ Cartoon published in *LeMan*
“Salam aleykoug, I am Mohammed,” “Aleykoug salam, I am Musa (Moses)”

Turkish satirical newspaper *LeMan* targeted by legal action

On June 30th, 2025 the public prosecutor’s office in Istanbul opened an investigation against several members of the team at the satirical magazine *LeMan* for “denigrating religious values” following publication of a cartoon. The cartoonist, Doğan Pehlevan, identified by the initials D.P., who drew the offending cartoon, editors-in-chief Zafer Aknar and Aslan Özdemir, graphic designer Cebraill Okçu, and editorial director Ali Yavuz were all arrested. An arrest warrant has also been issued for Tuncay Akgün, co-founder and editor-in-chief of *LeMan*, who is currently living in France.

In its June 26th issue, *LeMan* published a cartoon in which a character standing on top of rubble and bombs says, “*Salam aleykoug*,

also “insult to the president”. Pelevan, like the other defendants, is now out on bail and forbidden from leaving the country. The trial on the charges of “inciting hatred” is expected to take place in May 2026.

Punishment can also come in the form of a never-ending judicial harassment. Turkish cartoonist Zehra Ömeroğlu knows this well: her case was dismissed in 2025 with an acquittal, after a five-year-long prosecution for “obscenity” that began after one of her cartoons caught the attention of the Public Prosecutor of Istanbul. But the Prosecutor filed an appeal following her acquittal. While awaiting the outcome of that appeal in 2026, Zehra Ömeroğlu had these words about the Turkish government : “You’re there drawing at your desk, like always, but there’s a huge hand behind you. It’s just there, waiting. A huge hand, the hand of the government. It can slap you, squeeze you, crush you, or whatever it wants.”

Nik Titanik, a Croatian cartoonist, was sued in 2020 for insult by the former head of the well-known sports club Dinamo Zagreb. After years of hearings, he won his case in 2025. An appeal was immediately filed by the plaintiff, but it should be noted that the first instance judgement makes a very strong statement on the function of caricature and on what the protection of freedom of speech entails.

Elsewhere, legal limbo still envelopes Mario Natangelo, an Italian cartoonist sued for



▲ Zehra (Türkiye)

defamation by the sister of the Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni. Mario drew a political cartoon to comment on some seemingly racist declarations of the husband of Meloni’s sister, Francesco Lollobrigida, Minister of Agriculture. Initially, even the Italian journalists’ association, the very institution that should have protected him, seemed determined to discipline Natangelo, but (apparently) their sanctions were dismissed. This case illustrates the use of legal proceedings as a tool to silence criticism, as the Italian government mounts multiple lawsuits against journalists amid a global media landscape where the fate of journalists are more and more in the hands of powerful entrepreneurs.



I am Mohammed,” to another character who replies, *“Aleykoum salam, I am Musa (Moses).”* The public prosecutor’s office decided to seize copies of the issue containing the offending

cartoon. [LeMan’s website is no longer accessible.](#) The head of communications for the presidency, Fahrettin Altun, the Minister of the Interior, Ali Yerlikaya, the Minister of Justice, Yılmaz Tunç, and President Tayyip Erdoğan himself have successively denounced the cartoon.

In November 2025, the judge lifted the judicial control measures imposed on the defendants – Aknar, Okçu, Özdemir, and Yavuz – who were released on bail in September. The next hearing in the case is scheduled for May 5th, 2026.

Doğan Pelevan, who was being held in pre-trial detention in connection with a second case against him for “insulting the president” in relation to events prior to the publication of the controversial cartoon, also had his detention lifted at a second hearing held on November 17th, 2025. The court ordered his release on bail. The next hearing in this case is scheduled for March 24th, 2026.

◀ Plantu (France)

As the space for quality independent journalism, and for political cartoons, is shrinking and as geopolitical and economic factors are bringing many newsrooms to a protracted and silent death, Reporters Without Borders warns us about a “slow asphyxiation.”



▲ **Coco (France)**
 “Ramadan in Gaza – Start of a month of fasting – Not before sunset!”

Lastly, in Europe, just like anywhere else, highly polarising topics draw the attention of extremists and violent individuals upon political cartoonists. Their hatred takes the shape of verbal abuse, threats of violence, and online “shitstorms”. One example of this is Coco, who depicted the famine in Gaza, drawing Palestinians starved by the Israeli attacks trying to eat mice during Ramadan. The cartoon garnered some sharp criticism – which is fine – and Coco received numerous death threats – which absolutely is not.

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are hard-fought rights, which must continue to be defended in Europe. ”

Appeals Centre Europe : a new mechanism for resolving disputes

Sophie Walter, head of public affairs and communications for Europe, Appeals Centre Europe

The Appeals Centre Europe is a new organisation based on the Digital Services Act. The mission of the Appeals Center Europe is to independently and impartially resolve disputes raised by people and communities in the European Union about how social media platforms apply their content policies.

First cartoonists make use of Appeals Centre Europe

Since opening its doors in November 2024, the independent out-of-court dispute settlement body Appeals Centre Europe has received thousands of disputes from users and organisations across the EU. It is available for free to users on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, TikTok, Threads, and YouTube.

During its first year of operating, it has received eight confirmed disputes related to cartoons. These were about cartoons which had been removed from Facebook, in nearly all cases for violating Meta’s Adult Nudity and Sexual Activity policy. In four out of the eight cases, the Appeals Centre decided in favour of the user who submitted the disputes and in two cases it upheld the platform’s original decision. Two further cases are still pending a decision.

The Appeals Centre hopes to raise awareness of this new option among cartoonists and receive more disputes from this community in 2026. You can read a case study of one of the cases where the Appeals Centre overturned Meta’s decision below.

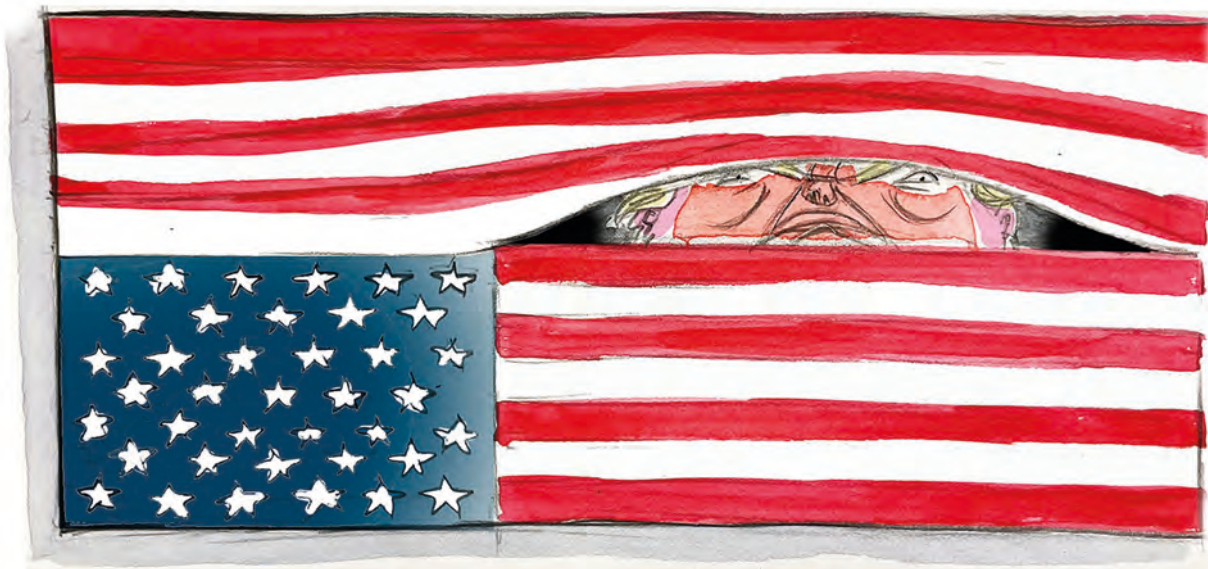
Case Study

In February 2025, a Facebook user from Poland submitted a dispute to Appeals Centre Europe after their cartoon was removed for violating the Adult Nudity and Sexual Activity Community Standard. In March, the Appeals Centre received and reviewed the content in question from the platform and deemed it not to violate Meta’s rules. As such, it recommended overturning the platform’s decision and restoring the cartoon with a warning screen, in line with Meta’s policy about real-world art of adult sexual activity. The Appeals Centre then informed Meta and the user who submitted the case of its decision. Meta implemented the decision and restored the cartoon to Facebook.

Situation in the Americas

United States: censorship and threats to freedom of expression

Julie Trébault, director of ARC - Artists at Risk Connection



◀ Ann Telnaes
(United States)

THE ACTUAL ENEMY FROM WITHIN

“ In August 2025, a cartoon by American-Mexican cartoonist Feggo suddenly found itself at the centre of the American culture war. The White House publicly targeted *4th of July From the South Border*, a 1999 satire denouncing the militarisation of the border, and demanded an internal review of the Smithsonian’s exhibitions. This was a rare and significant move: the US executive branch was singling out a specific work for removal from a federal museum. Long renowned for its curatorial independence, the Smithsonian now found that its funding could be subject to ideological conditions. The new cultural doctrine was unequivocal: honour a certain version of history and the state, yes; criticise them, no.

While the Feggo case illustrates external interference by political power, Ann Telnaes’ resignation from the *Washington Post* shows how these dynamics work from within. In January 2025,

the Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist left the newspaper after a cartoon depicting Jeff Bezos – the newspaper’s owner – bowing to Donald Trump was rejected prior to publication. The justification given for this refusal, allegedly repetitive subject matter, convinced no one. Telnaes’ resignation was not simply a personnel matter but a textbook case of institutional self-censorship. It illustrates a well-known playbook: when satire targets power, editorial motives mask the real issue, namely, the protection of economic and media power.

The recent case of cartoonist Adam Zyglis, Pulitzer Prize winner and cartoonist for the *Buffalo News* is yet another example. After publishing a cartoon in July 2025 criticising the handling of flooding in Texas and highlighting the irony of the government’s climate denial, he received death threats. Here, the punishment is no longer editorial, but directly personal.

Ann Telnaes
(United States)



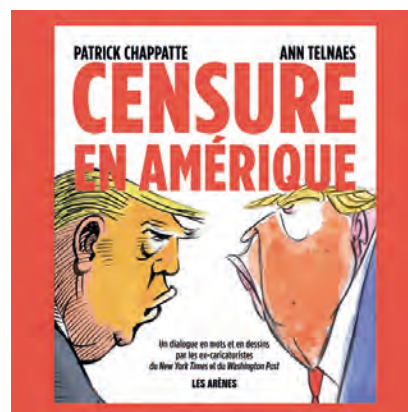
These events are part of a broader dynamic, marked by the proliferation of cultural conflict over the past few years and a hardening of artistic expression in the United States.

All three cases highlight the same phenomenon: the space in which American artists can exercise criticism is shrinking. And the works targeted were not chosen at random. Feggo's cartoon denounced the exclusion of migrants, an explosive issue for an administration committed to brutal migration policies. Digging up a twenty-year-old cartoon to condemn reflects a broader desire to reopen a debate that was thought to be settled and to redefine which stories and perspectives are considered legitimate in the public arena. Telnaes' satire touched on another sensitive issue: the close ties between political elites, tech giants and media institutions. The withdrawal of her cartoon revealed the growing fragility of the separation between editorial autonomy and institutional pressure in a country that has long upheld criticism of power as a democratic principle. The Zylgis case shows that punishment can go even further: criticising the

Fear takes hold in the United States

“Cartooning can sometimes be viewed as a profession for the brave. Every year, this bravery is recognised through the “Courage in Cartooning Award”, alternately conferred in the United States by Cartoonists Rights and in Switzerland by the Freedom Cartoonists Foundation. In Geneva, in 2022, and for the first time ever, the international award went to a citizen of an EU member state, the Hungarian press cartoonist Gabor Papái. Persecuted and prosecuted in his own country, he warned us: “If you too vote for populists in the United States or in France, you will suffer the same fate as us.”

His warning resonates chillingly in Trump's country today. We see verbal attacks on the press, lawsuits worth billions, and direct pressure from the media watchdog on the most scathing late-night TV show satirists who lampoon the administration. We see publishers' fear, both at local and



Censorship in America, a book by **Patrick Chappatte** and **Ann Telnaes**, published by Les Arènes, Paris 2025

national level, with respect to cartoons critical of the administration. We're seeing the emergence of what Ann Telnaes calls “pre-emptive obedience.” Preventive self-censorship.

As we know, autocrats are extremely thin-skinned and hate being ridiculed. Above all, they fear the corrosive power of

satire, which exposes the emperor's nakedness. But they don't need to pick up the phone to give instructions. When fear takes hold, censorship is no longer even necessary; self-censorship does the job for them. Today, fear has taken hold in the United States.

More than ever, editorial cartoons are the spearhead and symbol of a broader struggle for fundamental rights. And this fight that our organisations – Cartooning for Peace, Freedom Cartoonists, and Cartoonists Rights – have been waging worldwide is now being played out in our democracies. From this point forward, it may be American cartoonists who deserve the prize for courage. ”

Patrick Chappatte
Cartoonist, President, Freedom
Cartoonists Foundation

government's actions or positions now exposes artists to direct threats. A dangerous triad of political pressure, self-censorship and violent intimidation is becoming increasingly evident.

These events are part of a broader dynamic, marked by the proliferation of cultural conflict over the past few years and a hardening of artistic expression in the United States – a dynamic that has accelerated further over the past year. At ARC, we see this turning point in the wave of censorship of books and artistic works in the early 2020s, largely fuelled by a conservative reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement and the end of Donald Trump's first term in office. Initially led by school boards, local elected officials and community groups, the trend has gradually morphed into a federal-level cultural strategy, part of a broader pushback against "DEI," "gender ideology," and fact-based approaches to history. As campaigns for "patriotic education" spread, institutions are becoming more cautious, anticipating controversies before they even arise.

Federal cultural agencies such as the NEA⁷, NEH⁸ and Smithsonian are now under explicit review, with programmes considered 'divisive' coming under particular scrutiny. The media and journalists are also under constant political



pressure. The result is not overt censorship, but a climate of fear. And fear is a powerful tool: it pushes institutions to remain silent even before they are forced to be. At ARC – Artists at Risk Connection – we are seeing this dynamic on a daily basis. The number of US artists seeking our support has increased, particularly cartoonists. Through our emergency assistance, our

▲ Adam Zyglis (United States)

Cartoonist Feggo faces censorship

On August 21st, 2025 the White House published an article condemning a long list of exhibitions and work on display at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) that it deemed objectionable. Among the works mentioned was a cartoon drawn in 1999 by American cartoonist Feggo (Felipe Galindo) *4th of July From the South Border*. The cartoon shows a Mexican boy watching the 4th of July fireworks through a wall on the US-Mexican border.

Feggo's work was displayed as part of the exhibition *Presente! A Latino History of the United States* in the Molina Family Latino Gallery at the NMAH, which houses the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Latino project (the institution that manages the NMAH). In the same article, the White House denounced the museum project and what it called an "anti-American exhibition" that "defines Latino history as centuries of victimisation and exploitation" and characterises US history as rooted in "colonisation". The exhibition, scheduled to run until November 2025, closed its doors in the next few months.

According to the *Washington Post*, the museum's management was reportedly under direct pressure from the US administration. On March 27th, 2025 Donald Trump issued an executive order to restore "truth and reason in American history," openly targeting the Smithsonian. According to the *New York Times*, President Trump has stepped up his efforts to impose "a more positive view of American history" by taking steps to restrict the independence of the Smithsonian Institution.



▲ Feggo (Mexico-United States)

6 Acronym for "diversity, equity, and inclusion" programs

7 The National Endowment for the Arts

8 The National Foundation for the Humanities

National Survey on Artist Safety, and our upcoming National Safety Guide for US Artists, we are documenting the rise in threats, harassment and precariousness. The initial findings of our survey, conducted with over 90 partners in the cultural sector, are clear: artists engaged in political criticism are the most vulnerable. Many report adapting or abandoning certain topics – race, gender, immigration, political elites – for fear of losing their jobs, being harassed, or being removed from platforms.

For editorial and political cartoonists, whose work relies on satire and immediacy, the environment is particularly dangerous. Their work is often the first to be removed when an institution fears reprisals. What is at stake is not simply civic and engaged art: it is democratic culture itself, underpinned by public scrutiny of power.

The cases of Feggo and Telnaes remind us of one essential fact: when artists are silenced, freedom of expression is threatened, as is our collective ability to question, challenge and protect the critical space on which all democracies depend.”

What is at stake is not simply civic and engaged art: it is democratic culture itself, underpinned by public scrutiny of power.

Latin America: cartoonists face the decline of print media

Omar Zevallos, journalist and editorial cartoonist

“ The political and economic crisis in Latin America has hit the written press, the main outlet for political cartoonists, and their job prospects have been significantly curtailed. Over the last decade, more than 400 newspapers have closed in countries such as Venezuela, Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Argentina due to government restrictions and paper shortages, exacerbated by the rise in news consumption via social media.

Space given over to political cartoons is becoming scarcer and in countries such as Peru, where there are around 15 daily newspapers, only *La República*, where Carlos Tovar “Carlín” publishes, employs a political cartoonist on a daily basis, along with the cartoonist “Heduardo” once a week. The other newspapers have all laid off their cartoonists.

In addition to the decreasing number of cartoonists in traditional media, those who remain face pressure, censorship, and attacks.



In April 2024, the *El Comercio* newspaper in Quito (Ecuador) had five cartoonists. Today it has none. In addition, it has ceased its print edition and is now entirely digital. The newspaper’s employees and retirees are demanding their unpaid severance pay.

▲ Abecor (Bolivia)

The trend towards the closure of print editions is growing. In Nicaragua, for example, the online newspaper *Artículo 66* published a political cartoon created by artificial intelligence, explicitly stating: “NB: this cartoon was created using artificial intelligence technology.” The cartoons are imperfect and explicit, but the process forestalls any possibility of hiring a cartoonist with his own criteria.

Y ahora, Chucky 7 Vera, tras la Fiscal



◀ **Bonil (Ecuador)**
 "And now, Chucky 7 Vera, after the Prosecutor"

Added to this is the recurring pressure of censorship and attacks on cartoonists by members of Congress or politicians who feel unfairly targeted. In Bolivia, we have the case of the *Página Siete* newspaper, where cartoonist Abel Bellido Córdova, who signs his work "Abecor", was subjected to attacks and death threats. Although the situation didn't get further out of hand, the newspaper was forced to close due to the persistent blockade of state advertising by the government of Luis Arce of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) and pressure on the private sector not to advertise in the paper, which ultimately led to its closure.

The same scenario occurred in Ecuador, this time with cartoonist Xavier Bonilla, known as "Bonil". In June 2023, while President Guillermo Lasso was still in power, Bonil published a cartoon in the *El Universo* newspaper depicting the president of the Council for Citizen Participation and Social Control (CPCCS) as a clawed puppet chasing a prosecutor. Immediately, the CPCCS president's father, Gutemberg Vera Páez, filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor regarding the cartoon. In his complaint, he accused the artist of several crimes, including criminal association, organised crime, embezzlement, theft, incitement to hatred, influence peddling,

▼ **Carlín (Peru)**
 "Learn to tell them apart (don't get confused).
 – Delinquent dressed as a police officer – Delinquent police officer – Police officer doing his duty"

usurpation of office, corruption, and intimidation. He even sent a letter to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights denouncing the cartoon and announcing his intention to sue the *El Universo* newspaper as well. The charges were ultimately dismissed.

Under Daniel Noboa's presidency, a curious incident occurred. Bonil published a cartoon questioning the president's conduct. The next day, the president called the newspaper's



editorial office to speak to Bonil and complain, but it was the editor-in-chief who answered and, it seems, calmed the president down. Noboa has shown authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies and has publicly stated: "It's very unwise to be my enemy."

In Peru, in January 2024, cartoonist Carlos Tovar "Carlín" published a cartoon in *La República* newspaper depicting three identical police officers, distinguished by the following captions: "Delinquent in police uniform", "Delinquent police officer" and "Police officer on duty", under the headline: "LEARN TO TELL THEM APART (DON'T GET CONFUSED)". The cartoon highlighted the corruption and criminal acts committed by some rogue police officers. It provoked the indignation of the commander-in-chief of the police, Víctor Zanabria, who sent a formal notice to the *La República* group, demanding that Carlín apologise and remove his cartoon within 48 hours, failing which he would take legal action for defamation.

The institutional support Carlín received from press associations along with the international outcry were decisive in preventing the proceedings from continuing.

On April 20th, 2025 congressman and former marine, Jorge Montoya, of the Renovación Popular party, passed the "flagrant offences law", which allows police officers to use their firearms against criminals without facing prosecution. Since Carlín didn't address the topic of the new law, the lawmaker decided to publish a cartoon created using artificial intelligence on his X account. It shows a police officer pointing a gun at Carlín's head and saying: "From now on, whoever shoots first survives!", "Whoever does it pays the price!", with the frightened cartoonist replying, "How can I draw Montoya's law without getting kicked out of the newspaper?". The caption reads "*Caricaturas del Almirante Montoya*" (Admiral Montoya cartoons).

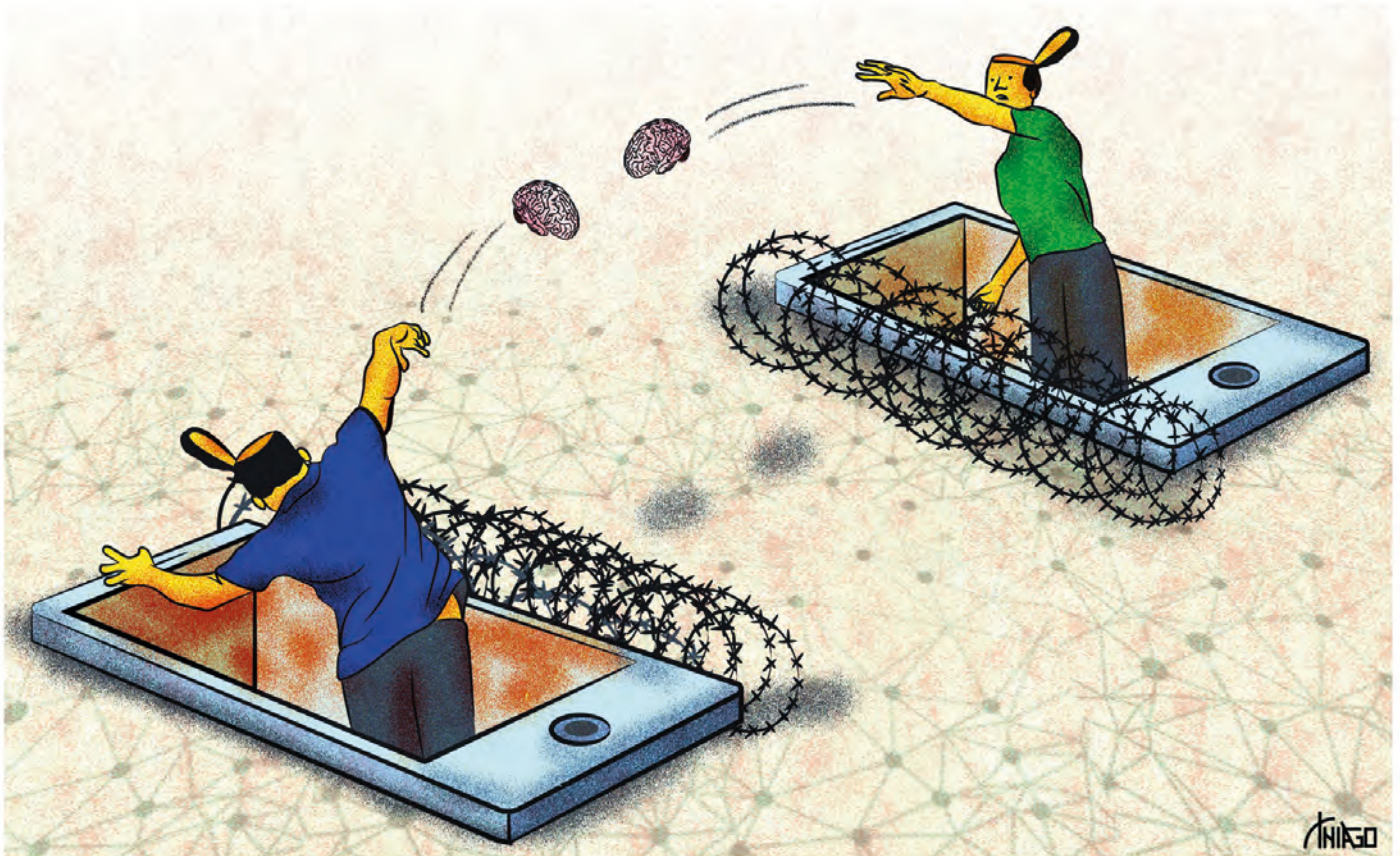
This kind of attack using commissioned AI-generated cartoons is part of a larger campaign of attacks and intimidation against individuals that Peruvian politicians consider their enemies. It embodies a new form of revenge adopted by some of them.

The situation is complicated for political cartoonists who, faced with the closure of an ever-growing number of traditional media outlets, will have to migrate to social media to publish their work. Even if this scenario promises many views and interactions, it makes it hard for them to earn a regular income. In addition, they'll remain vulnerable to legal attacks from those in power. Difficult times lie ahead. ”

▼ Rayma
(Venezuela)



Cartooning in the face of political polarisation



▲ Thiago
(Brazil)

The term 'polarisation' depicts a sharp division into two clearly distinct and opposing factions. Currently, these divergences are becoming increasingly irreconcilable.

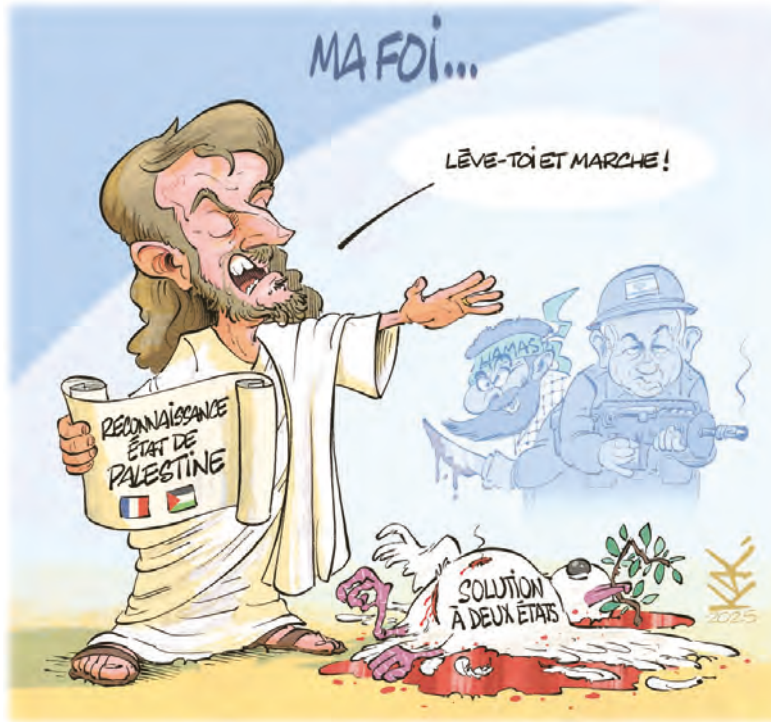
The 'polarisation' of political debate that is happening in increasingly fragmented societies mirrors the way social networks currently work as they reinforce the 'opinions' and 'preconceptions' of the majority through the use of algorithms, while spreading and promoting verbal abuse and simplistic arguments at the click of a button.

Cartooning for Peace, whose mission is to promote democratic values and civic debate through editorial and political cartoons, has observed this polarisation at work around the globe. Whether exploited by governments or not, it takes many forms but is always at the expense of respect for human rights, including

the fundamental right of freedom of expression. The case law of the European Court of Human Rights strongly emphasizes this point: "Freedom of expression is one of the essential foundations of a democratic society and one of the basic conditions for its progress and for the development of every individual."

The Court points out that "subject to the restrictions mentioned, notably in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, freedom of expression applies not only to information or ideas that are favourably received, or regarded as inoffensive or indifferent, but also to those that offend, shock, or disturb the State or any sector of the population. Such are the demands of pluralism, tolerance, and broadmindedness, without which there is no democratic society." The polarisation currently occurring in society is undermining this model.

How can cartoons be drawn in a context of extreme polarisation? Cartoonists' freedom of expression is increasingly exposed to the risk of censorship that goes beyond the constraints defined by law. This suppression is driven by the actions of individuals or pressure groups that aim to limit what can and cannot be expressed, based on considerations that fall outside the scope of the restrictions provided for by the legislator or that exploit them for purposes of censorship.



▲ Kak (France)
 "Have faith... –
 Get up and walk!
 – Recognition
 of the State
 of Palestine
 – Two-state
 solution"

During the period covered by this report, from June 2023 to June 2025, Cartooning for Peace was able to gauge, in particular, the power of polarisation at work in the Israel/Hamas conflict. In the context of the abominable crimes committed by Hamas on October 7th, 2023 and Israel's policy of annihilation in Gaza, the very possibility of putting a multitude of viewpoints into perspective through dialogue has been seriously undermined. Cartooning for Peace's network of 374 cartoonists from 79 countries has not been spared this extreme polarisation, with the thread of open dialogue strained if not entirely broken.

It is undeniable that during the period certain cartoons published worldwide were restricted due to their racist or antisemitic content; these do not fall within the mandate of Cartooning for Peace, which seeks to record threats to cartoonists' freedom of expression, not instances where hate-speech has indeed been perpetrated and should be prosecuted.

As part of its monitoring process, Cartooning for Peace has documented several cases whether in Europe, Canada, or the United States in which

an accusation of antisemitism has been used to censor a cartoon denouncing crimes committed by Israel in Gaza. The notion of censorship was amplified by the State of Israel itself instrumentalizing this accusation, illustrated in particular by a letter from Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who is subject to an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity, accusing the French President of fuelling antisemitism by recognising the State of Palestine.

While the global rise in antisemitism is an observable reality that must be tackled head on, the instrumentalisation of accusations of antisemitism when denouncing crimes committed by the State of Israel in Gaza must be fought just as vigorously, as it contributes to the harmful effects of the ongoing polarisation. As Portuguese academic Paulo Jorge Fernandes of Nova University in Lisbon points out: "Confusing criticism of Israel with antisemitism is an increasingly common mistake, which does little to protect Jews, but greatly advances right-wing political agendas in Israel and Palestine."

In March 2025, Tony Doris, editor of the *Palm Beach Post* editorial page, was fired by Gannett, the newspaper's owner and largest media group in the United States, after selecting a cartoon by cartoonist Jeff Danzinger that drew criticism from the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach in its denunciation of the human cost of the war.

In August 2025, cartoonist Bob Withmore lost his job at *Creative Loafing*, a local newspaper in Tampa, Florida, because of a cartoon criticizing Israel, which two readers described as antisemitic. The newspaper's owners agreed with the readers and insisted that Bob Withmore be fired, apologising for publishing the cartoon. It should be noted that they did not accept his resignation, which he had offered to avoid damaging his reputation. He was eventually reinstated to the editorial staff after readers demanded his return.

Disliking a cartoon does not justify calls for censorship, let alone threats against its author.

It is particularly noteworthy in this case that the newspaper distanced itself from its cartoonist, when it should have protected him and stood by him once his cartoon had been approved by the editorial board. The fact that readers reactions can be used as a guide for dismissing a cartoonist employed by a media outlet is a particularly worrying trend in a context where the number of cartoonists lucky enough to be part of an editorial team is steadily declining.

Some Israeli Hostages Are Home After Over a Year of Merciless War



► Danziger (United States)

The latest example of censorship in this context of extreme polarisation is the case of Israeli cartoonist Kichka, a member of Cartooning for Peace. In April 2024, the Polish organisation Kraków dla Palestyny called for the censorship of his exhibition ahead of its opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow. Despite the pressure, the museum director kept the exhibition open. While opinions differ on the principle of using boycotts as a means of action, attacks on creative freedom, freedom of expression, and now academic freedom are currently on the rise, with an inherent risk of abuse.

Disliking a cartoon does not justify calls for censorship, let alone threats against its author.

In March 2024, cartoonist Coco was the victim of a wave of threats, including death threats,

► Bob Whitmore (United States)



on social media after publishing a cartoon in *Libération* about the famine in Gaza (page 26 of the report). A member of parliament from La France Insoumise (LFI) party reacted to the cartoon by saying, "You won't have our hatred, but you deserve it," echoing the words of a relative of a victim who died in the terrorist attacks at the Bataclan in Paris. Coco said the cartoon "was very simple for me. I wanted to speak up against the famine in Gaza and add a touch of irony; it evokes fasting and famine. When I saw this message, it made my blood boil because it was a member of parliament who not only repeated the words of Antoine Leiris, who lost his wife at the Bataclan, but who also had the audacity to say it to someone like me who's just doing my job, and who knows that I survived the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, something she can't not know." It should be noted that Coco had the support of her editorial team and many public figures.

As Paulo Jorge Fernandes points out, "even if you don't like the work of a particular cartoonist, even if you abhor their cartoons, the artist has the right to express their opinion, provided that it complies with the law and is not used as a means to incite hatred and violence. Cartoonists should have the right to defend themselves. There's no such thing as good or bad censorship in this regard. If everyone is offended by a particular cartoon, there will soon be nothing left to discuss or draw, because whatever the subject, there'll always be someone who hates it. Democracy is not a system created to defend our ideas, but to allow those who disagree with us to present and defend theirs."

Executive Summary: "Cartoonists Online: Global Free Expression Survey"

Alberto Godioli, associate professor at the University of Groningen and co-founder of the Forum for Humour and Law (ForHum)

Ana Pedrazzini, researcher in communication and semiotics at the Instituto Patagónico de Estudios en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (IPEHCS) CONICET – National University of Comahue in Argentina

Introduction and Methodology

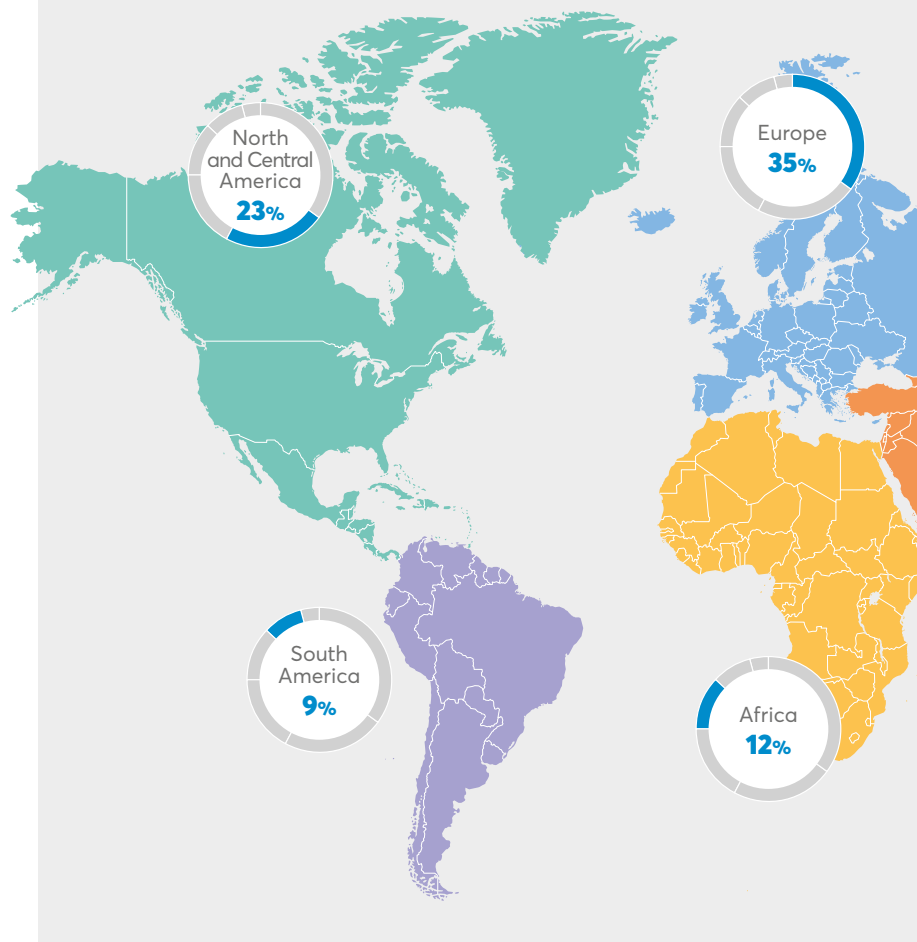
The "Cartoonists Online: Global Free Expression Survey" report presents the findings of a worldwide study targeting political cartoonists, exploring their online experiences, challenges, and perspectives on freedom of expression. A questionnaire was disseminated between April 25th and July 18th, 2025, and was available in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic. It included 46 closed-ended questions and one open-ended question, distributed through cartoonists' organisations, websites, and direct emails.

A total of 306 cartoonists accessed the questionnaire, with 298 providing consent and 258 completing it entirely. The survey ensured anonymity and obtained informed consent before participation. The report is divided into two phases: Phase I details question-by-question response distributions, while Phase II examines variations in responses based on region, gender, and age.

Phase I: response distributions

1. Demographic Data

World nations are largely represented, with a total of 72. The most represented countries include the USA (14%), France (10%), and Canada (9%).



2. Online Posting Habits

Posting Frequency: 69% of cartoonists post their work online **daily or weekly**, while only 3% never post cartoons.

Preferred Platforms: Facebook and Instagram are the most popular platforms for posting cartoons, followed by X (formerly Twitter), personal websites, and cartoonist membership organisation websites.

Policy Changes and Platform Usage: Half of the respondents reported posting less frequently on certain platforms due to changes in policy or ownership, with X (ex-Twitter) being the most cited platform.

Communication Channels: 75% of cartoonists communicate with colleagues via **email**, followed by Facebook Messenger (61%) and WhatsApp (55%).

Authorship and Accounts: Most cartoonists use their **real names** (65%) when posting online, followed by those who use an **alias** (34%), and they are **evenly split** on maintaining separate accounts for personal and professional use.

Publishers: The primary publishers of cartoons include **newspapers** (58%), **cartoonist membership organisations** (47%), and **magazines** (46%).

3. Online Censorship

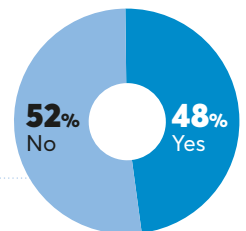
- **Cartoon Removal:** 43% of respondents reported having at least one cartoon removed from a platform. The most common reasons for removal were **political content** (52%), **religious sensibilities** (19%), and **hate speech** (16%).

- **Account Suspensions:** 20% of cartoonists experienced **temporary account suspensions**, primarily due to **political content** (39%). 8% had their accounts **permanently closed**, again largely due to political content .

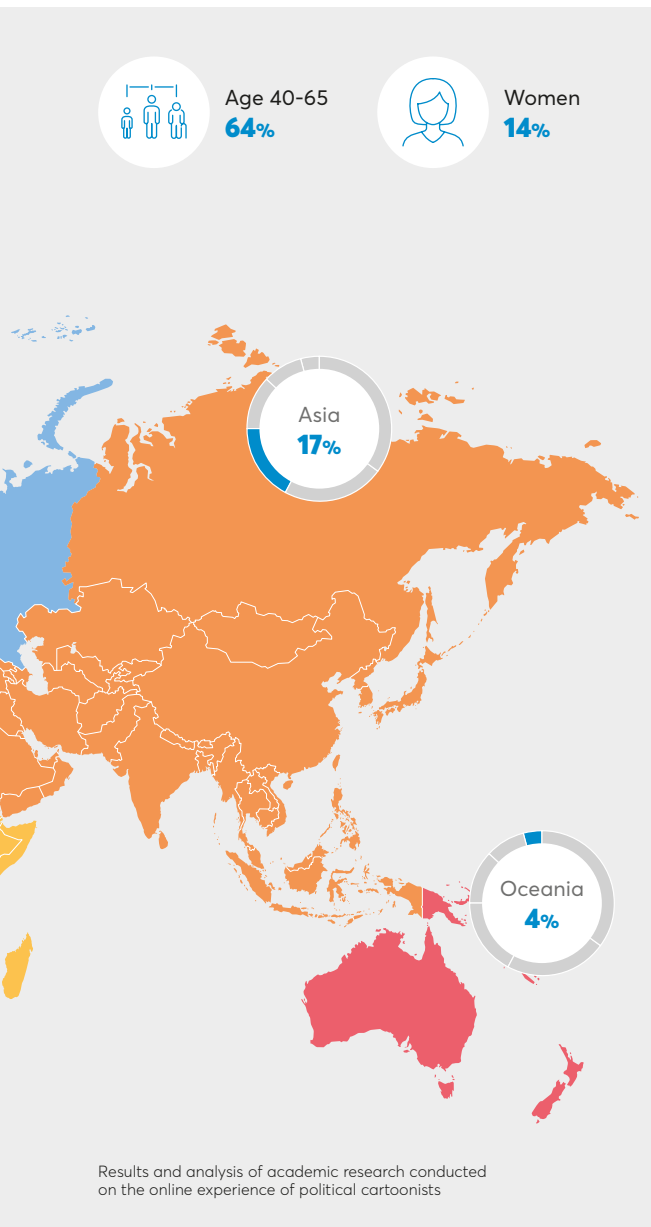
- A considerable percentage of cartoonists state that **no reasons** were given for their cartoon removal (35%), account suspension (39%), or account closure (55%).

- **Appeals:** A majority of cartoonists appealed decisions regarding cartoon removal (61%), account suspensions (76%) and closures (85%), with 31% to 44% succeeding in reversing the decisions.

Do you suspect you have been "shadow banned" i.e. the platform prevents your posts from being seen by your followers?

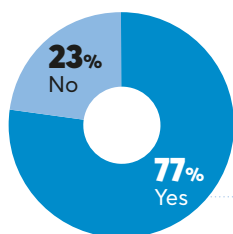


- **Shadow Banning:** Nearly half of the respondents suspect they have been "shadow banned", where their posts are hidden from followers without notification.



4. Online Threats and Insults

- **Insults and Threats:** Over 75% of cartoonists received insulting messages, while 53% received threats. The primary motivations for these messages were political views (74%), insults to political figures (64%), and religious reasons (45%).
- **Frequency and Reporting:** Most insults and threats were received occasionally (75%), with 70% of cartoonists choosing not to report these incidents to moderators. 44% of cartoonists received between 10 and 100 insults/threats.
- **Misogynistic Comments:** Among female respondents, 64% reported receiving misogynistic comments, highlighting a significant gender-based issue.



Has anyone ever written a comment or sent you a message about a cartoon that contained an insult?

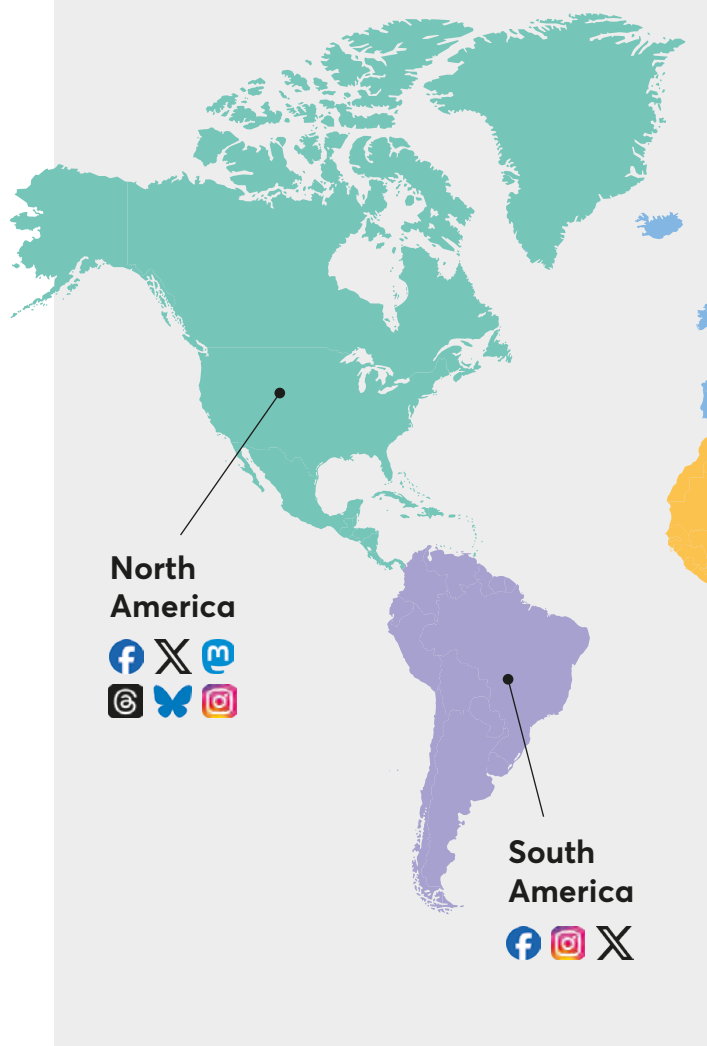
5. Online Security

- **Personal Information and Family Impact:** 10% of cartoonists had their personal information posted online without consent, and 18% reported that family members received negative messages due to their cartoons.
- **Hacking and Impersonation:** 25% experienced account hacking, and 34% were impersonated online or had their cartoons altered.
- **DDOS Attacks:** 13% faced DDOS attacks or digital communication disruptions.
- **Anxiety and Fear:** A majority of cartoonists (53%) reported feeling anxious or fearful due to online insecurity.
- **Government Involvement:** 29% suspected their nation's government was involved in online threats or censorship.

Phase II: Exploring Variations by Region, Gender, and Age

1. Regional Variations

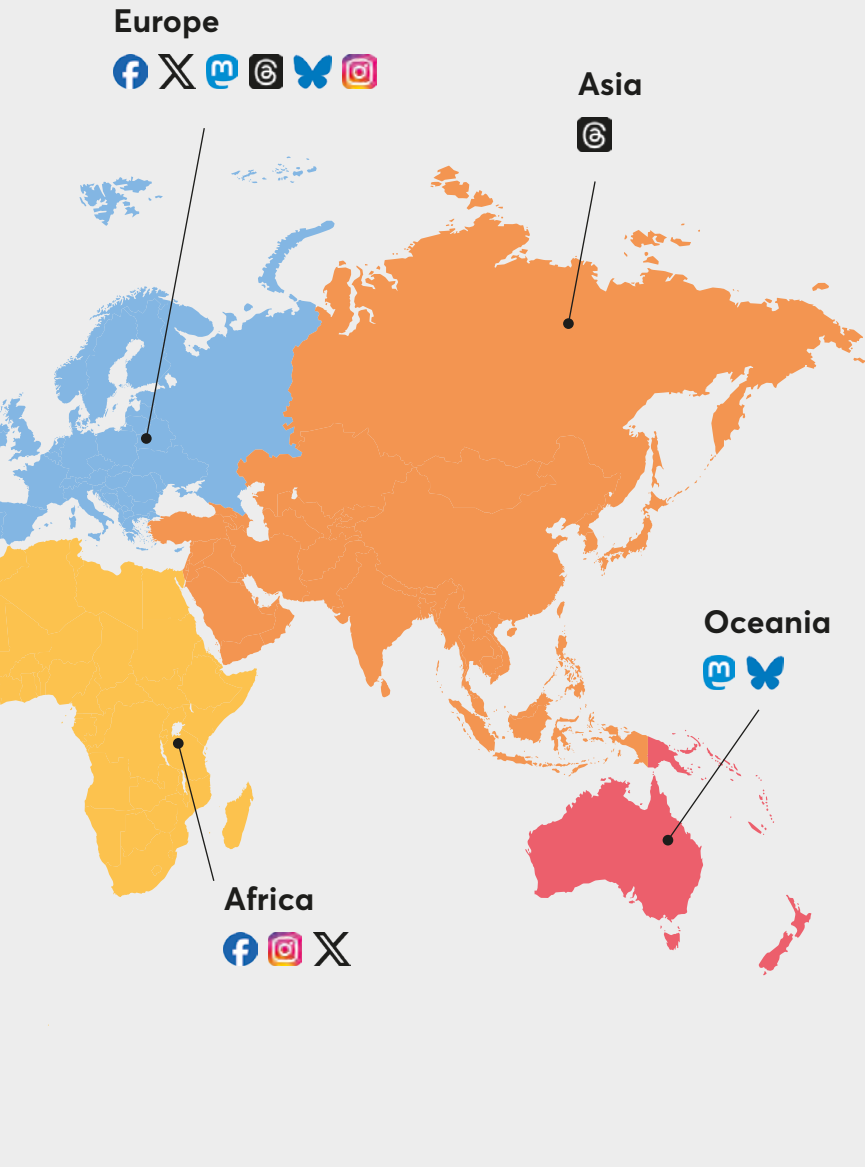
The analysis of regional variations revealed significant differences in how cartoonists from different parts of the world experience online challenges:



Platform Usage:

- **Africa and South America:** Cartoonists in these regions show a higher relative use of Facebook, Instagram, and X (ex-Twitter) compared to other regions. They also exhibit low use of Bluesky and Threads.
- **Asia:** While sharing some patterns with Africa and South America, Asian cartoonists demonstrate a more moderate use of Facebook and Instagram and a relatively higher use of Threads.

Main social media networks used



- **Europe and North and Central America:** These regions are characterised by a **higher use of Bluesky and personal websites**, with a **lower use of Instagram** compared to Africa and South America. Overall, the distribution of platform usage is **more balanced** in these regions.
- **Oceania:** This region stands out for its **low use of Facebook and Instagram** and a **higher use of Mastodon and Bluesky**.

The **dendrogram** illustrates the clustering of regions based on platform usage, showing that **Europe and North and Central America** are the most similar, while **Africa and Asia** are closely related. **South America** is positioned between these two groups, and **Oceania** remains the most distinct region.

Shadow Banning:

- **Asia:** Cartoonists in this region report a **higher suspicion of shadow banning**, indicating a perception that their posts are being suppressed by platforms.
- **Oceania:** In contrast, cartoonists here report **lower suspicions of shadow banning**.

Threats and Government Involvement:

- **Africa:** Cartoonists in this region are **more likely to receive threats** compared to other regions.
- **Asia and Africa:** Cartoonists in these regions are **more likely to suspect government involvement** in online insecurity, such as censorship, threats, or hacking.

Anxiety and Fear:

Asia and Africa: Cartoonists in these regions report **higher levels of anxiety and fear** due to online insecurity.

2. Gender Variations

The analysis of gender variations focused on differences between **male and female cartoonists**, excluding the "Other" and "I prefer not to answer" categories due to their low frequency.

Targeting Based on Gender:

Female cartoonists are **significantly more likely to be targeted** because of their gender compared to their male counterparts. This finding underscores the **unique challenges** faced by women in the profession, including **misogynistic comments** and **gender-based harassment**.

Anxiety and Government Involvement:

Women report **higher levels of anxiety** related to online experiences and are **more likely to suspect government involvement** in online threats or censorship. This suggests that **female**

cartoonists may feel more vulnerable in the digital space, possibly due to the intersection of gender and professional risks.

3. Age Variations

The analysis of age variations revealed distinct patterns among different age groups:

Posting Frequency:

Younger cartoonists (18-39 years) are more likely to post cartoons monthly, while older cartoonists tend to post more frequently (daily or weekly).

Online Insecurity:

Younger cartoonists report a higher incidence of shadow banning, account closures, and feelings of anxiety compared to their older colleagues. This trend suggests that younger professionals may be more exposed to online risks, possibly due to a greater reliance on digital platforms among some of them and less-established professional networks.

Government Involvement:

Younger cartoonists are also more likely to suspect government involvement in online threats or censorship, reflecting a heightened sense of vulnerability in the digital environment.

Conclusion

The “Cartoonists Online: Global Free Expression Survey” provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by political cartoonists worldwide. Key findings include:

- Most cartoonists disclose having received **insults or threats** for their work.
- **Political content** is the primary driver of censorship, account suspensions, and threats.
- A majority of cartoonists report feelings of **anxiety or fear** because of online insecurity.
- **Regional disparities** significantly influence experiences of online insecurity, with **Africa and Asia** facing higher levels of threats and suspicion of government involvement.
- **Gender-based targeting** is a critical issue, particularly for female cartoonists, who experience **higher rates of misogynistic comments and anxiety**.
- **Younger cartoonists** feel more vulnerable to online risks, including shadow banning, account closures, and psychological distress.

The report highlights the **urgent need for greater protections** for cartoonists, particularly in regions and demographics where threats and censorship are most prevalent. It also calls for **further research** into the **long-term impacts** of online harassment on cartoonists’ mental health and professional sustainability. By addressing these challenges, the global community can help **safeguard free expression** and support the vital role of political cartoonists in society.

Cartoonists Online: Global Free Expression Survey

Find the full research publication here:



Extracts from interviews conducted by Ana Pedrazzini

Saint-Just-Le-Martel, France, October 2025⁹



◀ Feggo
(United States)

"My work was censored by The White House.

My [illustration] was in a museum at The Smithsonian, the Museum of American History, in the History of the Latino section. They pointed out my work saying that it was not very American and that it was suggesting open borders. They removed it because [the government] exercised a financial pressure on The Smithsonian.

It was not only my work or the work of other artists who happened to be Latino or African American artists (what a coincidence!) that were concerned. Texts based on facts and history in other museums were also targeted. They didn't like them. So, they are going to remove [material] from eight museums, [amending them] to have a different view, a more official view, let's say.

For a month after this incident, every morning I was waking up with anxiety. This was very disturbing, it really got me off track, distracted me from my projects. It put me in a [position] I didn't want to be, but now I am. I'm going to honor it and I'm going to keep fighting for freedom of expression, saying no to censorship."



◀ António
(Portugal)

"The Internet can be fantastic for disseminating [cartoons]. But on the other hand, there are a lot of problems. We never know who controls whom, and now with artificial intelligence, it's going to get worse.

I would like cartoonists' talent to be their own, but now [others] are going to use the power of artificial intelligence to deceive, to pass off a cartoon as their own, when it's not entirely their cartoon.

Obviously, it's difficult, the balance between rules and censorship. I don't want censorship, but I want to sort this out otherwise will be an impossible mess, impossible to live with. We have to pursue cases where we have proof that they used someone's image to create a narrative that they never made, because that's criminal."



◀ Donnelly
(United States)

"The women I know in the United States who are editorial cartoonists draw about politics, myself included.

I think there's still a stigma against being opinionated and being funny about political issues, even though we know we have the freedom, I just sense women don't want to put themselves out there. Maybe because they're afraid of being attacked.

The media owners control what cartoonists want to say by financially withholding sales. Nobody's saying 'you can't draw that.' They're just saying, 'well, we don't want to publish it, so we're not going to pay.' It's a form of censorship. And so much of what we call legacy media are scared of cartoons. We've seen newspapers pulling back from publishing independent thought in cartoons because they're afraid of what their readers will say, or that their readers will be upset."

⁹ In continuation of this study, interviews are currently being conducted with a panel of editorial cartoonists.



◀ Plantu
(France)
"Charlie Hebdo
– Everything
is forgiven –
I am Charlie"

Conclusion

The editorial and political cartoonists covered in this report are central to the collective commitment in defence of democratic values and human rights. In the face of numerous tragic events and challenges, cartoons provide a constant source of inspiration, both in their denunciation of the forces we want to see defeated and in their delineation of a better world to which we aspire. "Cartooning is a witness to democracy," the late Tignous stated in 2012. These words have perhaps never resonated as strongly as they do today.

Going beyond the information on the situation of threatened cartoonists in this report, the aim is to advocate for the profession and the role it has to play in countering the democratic emergency in progress worldwide. Everyone can get involved at their own level, helping to keep cartooning alive and with it freedom of expression, the culture of debate, and the subversive and liberating power of humour.

Through our recommendations, we call for substantive changes to the hostile environment in which cartoonists currently operate on digital platforms, while urging editorial teams of so-called traditional media outlets to promote the contribution of cartoonists within their organisations. Both are needed for the profession to survive, over and above the upheavals of global geopolitics.

Recommendations

1. Facing online censorship experienced by cartoonists

1.1. Formalisation and transparency of the moderation process

There needs to be greater transparency in the moderation of online content by social media platforms. All stages of the moderation process should be clearly set out and documented in detail.

Cartoonists must be explicitly notified of any moderation measure affecting the visibility or dissemination of content, together with the reasons, as is the case for all other moderation decisions.

In the event of removal of a cartoon or suspension of an account because of a cartoon, the cartoonist must be given the reason for the decision. This is far from being the case at present.

1.2. Limitations and traceability of the use of algorithmic moderation

Moderation based entirely on artificial intelligence cannot truly grasp cartoons and the cultural and political codes in which they are

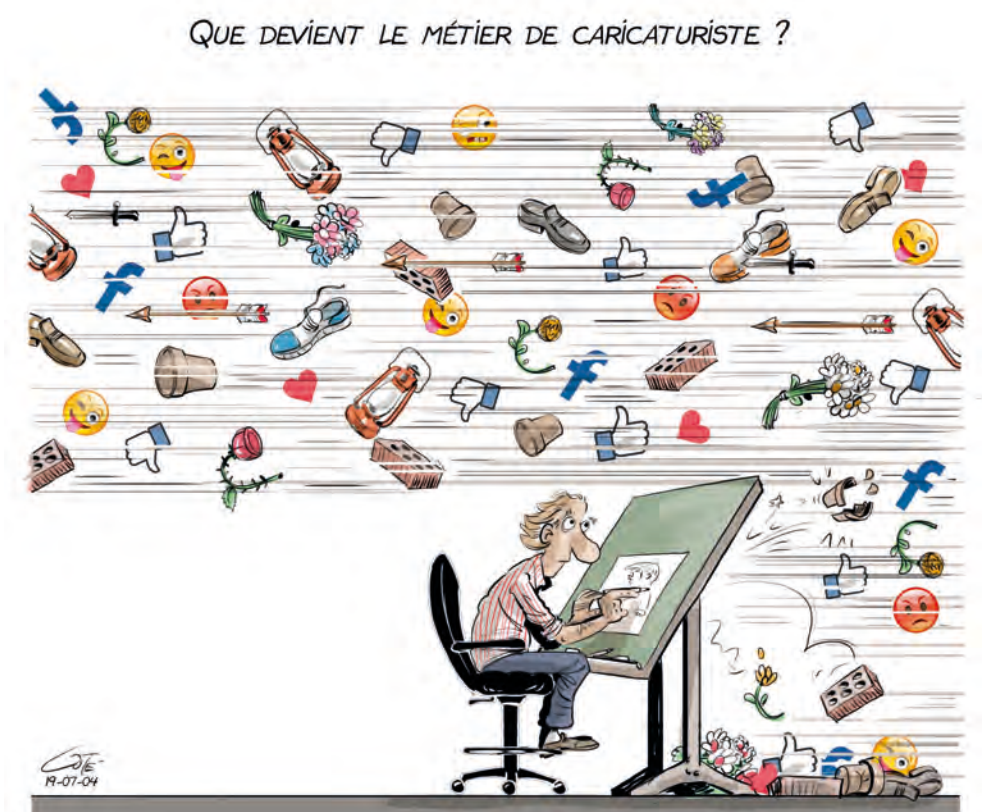
embedded. While “political content” is the main reason given for removing cartoons and suspending cartoonists’ accounts, it is crucial to ensure that no final decision is made solely on the basis of algorithmic moderation.

Automated tools can only serve as a support tool, not as an autonomous decision-making mechanism.

These tools must be auditable by trusted third parties and the audit results made public if necessary, on a regular basis, in order to limit their biases and the systemic risks associated with the technologies.

1.3. Role of human moderation

Moderation decisions concerning journalistic and satirical content should be taken by reinforced teams, fully trained in local cultural, political, aesthetic, and linguistic issues, that reflect a range of views and are representative of society as a whole, are specifically trained to handle reports from Internet users, administrative bodies and judicial authorities, and that work both



◀ Côté (Canada)
"What is becoming of the profession of cartoonist?"

independently from national authorities and in close collaboration with specialised lawyers.

1.4. Regulation of shadow banning

The practice of moderation whereby a platform limits the visibility of a user's content or account without notifying the user in question affects many cartoonists. The practice of unnotified shadow banning needs to end, and any moderation measure affecting the visibility or dissemination of an author's content must be explicitly notified and justified.

1.5 Access to an appeals platform under all circumstances plus a stronger appeals mechanism

Internet users have the right to appeal and challenge moderation decisions. The relevant appeals process must be clearly accessible and understandable.

When access to a cartoonist's content, account, or page is blocked, it is essential to provide a platform where he or she can appeal.

Inability to access their own content or page in the event of an account being blocked should not prevent cartoonists from exercising their right to appeal.

In the event of a permanent account suspension, appeals mechanisms need to be strengthened.

1.6 Prevention of coordinated 'mass reporting' campaigns

In order to prevent abuse and censorship strategies involving mass reporting, platforms should provide mechanisms to block or neutralise reports from a certain threshold or stage in the process, when there are clear signs of abusive coordination.

1.7 Reporting and handling of state censorship online

Media platforms need to establish a secure and independent reporting and processing mechanism for cases where online censorship originates from a state actor.

2. Protection of cartoonists against online exposure to unlawful content

2.1 Reporting unlawful content

Cartoonists rarely report online insults and/or threats against them to the platforms where they occur, even though the vast majority of cartoonists experience such unlawful content.

Cartoonists should report online insults and threats against them more systematically, as such behaviour should not be trivialised or left unanswered by platforms that are responsible for moderating unlawful content.

Within the scope of the Digital Services Act (DSA), cartoonists should systematically forward unlawful content that targets them to trusted flaggers for reporting to platforms.

2.2 Improving mechanisms for reporting unlawful content

Mechanisms for reporting abuse on social media platforms are an essential part of the overall content moderation process. These mechanisms need to be improved to afford cartoonists better protection and preserve their freedom of expression online. Reporting mechanisms should be more accessible, transparent, effective, and efficient, accompanied by clearer and more regular communication with platforms.

2.3 Compliance with international standards and governance models

Platforms' moderation policies must comply with established international standards relative to human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

In accordance with their human rights responsibilities, digital platforms should base their governance on the key principles set out by UNESCO in 2023 in a document entitled "Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms: Safeguarding Freedom of Expression and Access to Information through a Multi-Stakeholder Approach."

2.4 Appointment of a national legal director

Platforms should appoint a legal director in each of the countries in which they operate, subject to security risks. The director would be the main point of contact for the relevant national authorities, the platform's legal representative in judicial proceedings, and the guarantor of the platform's compliance with national and international law.



2.5 Protection of women cartoonists from gender-based violence facilitated by technology

Women cartoonists must be better protected against gender-based violence facilitated by technology. Digital platforms need to develop policies and standards to guide the response to this violence, including aligning their content moderation policies and practices with international human rights standards, and strengthening codes of conduct and responses to reports of such acts of violence.

2.6 Systemic analysis

More than half of the cartoonists questioned in our research reported feeling anxious and/or scared by events they experienced online. Digital platforms need to include the situation of cartoonists in the assessment of their policies, moderation systems and algorithmic approaches on human rights, with a view to identifying systemic risks and adjusting their policies and practices to mitigate them.

3. Cartoonists in the so-called traditional media ecosystem

3.1 Independent media identification

News media outlets that publish cartoons should be identified as such by entities independent of the government in accordance with non-discretionary procedures free from political interference, based, as far as possible, on self-regulatory standards, transparent compliance mechanisms, and objective criteria, like the Journalism Trust Initiative. Their recognition should not be determined via the unilateral power of platforms and should enable the specific role of news media in public debate to be acknowledged.

3.2 The place of cartoonists in newsrooms

While many cartoonists operate in a hostile environment on social media, the value and place of cartoons in the media ecosystem must be promoted and developed by the so-called traditional media, which play a key role in the very survival of satirical cartoons in the media ecosystem.

3.3 Protection of cartoonists

Traditional media outlets that publish cartoons must assume their editorial responsibility and guarantee their solidarity with cartoonists, not only when legal proceedings are initiated,

but also when controversies and/or attacks targeting a cartoon and/or a cartoonist are launched on social media.

4. Anticipating the risks posed by artificial intelligence



◀ Zehra (Türkiye)

4.1 Traceability of content

Given the risks posed by the rapid development of AI, it is essential to ensure content traceability by way of metadata or systematic, undetectable and tamper-proof fingerprinting of the cartoons used in order to track the dissemination of content and detect any potential manipulation by a third party.

4.2 Transparency of training databases

Training databases for image generation models should be transparent, open or audited via dedicated platforms, enabling content resulting from the work of cartoonists to be tracked and identified.

4.3 Responsibility of distribution platforms

Distribution platforms (particularly social media) need to actively monitor content. This includes:

- identification of authentic cartoons and their authors;
- reporting image tampering or AI-generated cartoons.

4.4 Compensation and collective bargaining

Collective bargaining mechanisms need to be established to compensate cartoonists for any economic or moral damage arising from the unauthorised use of their work in AI systems.

4.5 Opt-in principle

The use of copyrighted work in training databases must be conditional on the explicit opt-in of cartoonists, excluding any notion of implicit or default consent.

These recommendations have been reviewed by Reporters Without Borders.

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Cartooning for Peace

The Cartooning for Peace organisation was created in 2006 at the initiative of Kofi Annan, Nobel Peace Prize and former General Secretary of the United Nations, and press cartoonist Plantu. Now chaired by French press cartoonist Kak, Cartooning for Peace is an international network of cartoonists committed to the promotion of freedom of expression, human rights and mutual respect among people upholding different cultures and beliefs, using the universal language of press cartoons.

cartooningforpeace.org



Cartoonists Rights

Cartoonists Rights is a free expression NGO incorporated in Virginia, USA over 25 years ago that defends cartoonists who suffer human rights violations arising from their artwork. Abused, criminalised, displaced, or threatened individuals may receive support with relocation expenses or medical bills, get legal guidance, have representations made to relevant authorities, and more. Biannually, the Robert Russell Courage in Cartooning Award (named for our founder) recognises a cartoonist of exceptional bravery, alternating with Freedom Cartoonists.

cartoonistsrights.org



Freedom Cartoonists Foundation

Based in Geneva, the Freedom Cartoonists Foundation supports editorial cartoon as a vital pillar of civic debate and democracy. It promotes freedom of the press and expression through dialogue. Chaired by cartoonist Patrick Chappatte and Marie Heuzé, former head of communications at the UN, it has presented since 2012 the "Kofi Annan Courage in Cartooning Award" (alternating with Cartoonists Rights) and runs a support fund for threatened cartoonists, and develops educational projects focused on human rights.

freedomcartoonists.com



Forum for Humor and the Law (ForHum)

The Forum for Humor and the Law (ForHum) was founded in 2022 by Dr Alberto Godioli (University of Groningen) and Prof. Laura E. Little (Temple University School of Law). It serves as a worldwide platform for legal professionals, researchers, practitioners, and anyone interested in the multiform relationship between humor, freedom of expression and the law. ForHum's recent initiatives include its toolkit for the judiciary *What's in a Joke? Assessing Humor in Free Speech Jurisprudence* (2025, published in collaboration with Columbia Global Freedom of Expression), the traveling exhibition *Designed to Provoke: Visual Humor in Court* (ongoing) and its open-access database collecting legal cases and content moderation decisions about humorous and satirical expression.

forhum.org



Columbia Global Freedom of Expression

Columbia Global Freedom of Expression seeks to strengthen freedom of expression worldwide by advancing the understanding of international and national norms and institutions that best protect the free flow of information and expression in an interconnected global community. We do so by sharing knowledge and standards through our Global Database of Freedom of Expression Case Law and by fostering dialogue among domestic, regional, international courts and other stakeholders.

globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu



Reporters Without Borders

Reporters Without Borders has been working for 40 years to promote press freedom and the right to information around the world. With consultative status at the UN and UNESCO, the organisation has its headquarters in Paris, France, 15 international offices and sections, and works with more than 150 correspondents worldwide.

rsf.org/fr



Global Media Defence Fund / UNESCO

Implemented by UNESCO under the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, the GMDF supports local, regional and global not-for-profit organizations working to bolster journalists' legal protection and enhance media freedom through legal assistance, investigative journalism and strategic litigation.

unesco.org/en/global-media-defence-fund



CFC – Savoir partager les savoirs

For 40 years, the CFC has managed press and book copyrights for the redistribution of their content across all sectors of activity. It also supports cultural projects that contribute to reading and media education, the professionalisation and sharing of experiences among writers, and the promotion of French works abroad.

cfcopies.com



◀ Boligán
(Mexico)

This report was produced by *Cartooning for Peace* and *Cartoonists Rights*.
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Date of publication : March 2026