Politics of Fear? Reception Analysis of the *New Yorker* Obama Cover's Meaning, Effect and Editorial Decision

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Abstract: *In July of 2008, the* New Yorker's *cover depicted Barack Obama dressed in traditional Muslim garb 'fist bumping' his wife Michelle, who was dressed in traditional black-militant attire. In the background was a painting of Osama Bin Laden as well as an American flag burning in the fireplace. In the tradition of* New Yorker *magazine, the cover was meant to be a socially scathing satire that would create buzz. But, because of the visual symbolism and the lack of text in the cartoon, it was subject to many differing readings and evaluations—including calls for boycotts and firings—especially among partisan pundits. This study examines how the audience, rather than media professionals, read the Obama cover. The study examines how a group immersed in media and politics perceived the intended meaning, the effect that the magazine cover had on the campaign as well as the value of the political cartoon. The study uses Q methodology to extract readings of the media text. The first factor saw the cartoon through the partisan filter, reading it as offensive and pushing the boundaries of free speech. The second factor read the cartoon through a libertarian filter, reading the cartoon as necessary for debate and free speech. The final factor read the cartoon more literally, perceiving it as necessary in order to question the candidate and media bias.*

Satire is essential to a democratic society as it allows for citizens to discuss substantial issues in a forum that is removed from the harsher reality of politics. Satire also reduces complex issues into a form that is consumable by everyday people who are not policy wonks, thus democratizing politics. Finally, satire pushes the boundaries of free speech in a democracy by questioning the status quo and unmasking taboo. But in some instances, because of satire's inherent reliance on symbolism and stereotypes, it fails to be effective. Instead, it draws great controversy and can even undermine the original intent of the author. Such was the case with the *New Yorker* magazine, when in 2008 it published a cover featuring a cartoon of then-presidential

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candidate Barack Obama, dressed in traditional Muslim garb, fist bumping his wife Michelle, who was dressed in a Black Panther-type militant attire and with her hair in the afro style (which is not her own). The couple was standing in the Oval Office, which included a picture of Osama Bin Laden on the wall and an American flag burning in the fireplace.*

The cartoon, titled *Politics of Fear*, was meant to lampoon the belief held by some conservatives that candidate Barack Obama was a secret Muslim who hated America. But, instead of drawing debate centered on the absurdity of these beliefs, the controversy ended up being centered on the cartoon, the cartoonist, and the magazine. So, for two weeks, the magazine cover was a hot topic for a political punditry required to fill the 24/7 news cycle. Predictably, commentators from the left demonized the cover as racist and fear-mongering, while commentators on the right decried the cover as painting Republicans as bigots. Moreover, media commentators were condemning the *New Yorker* as being insensitive, sophomoric and incompetent. Some media commentators even called for boycotts, resignations and censorship.

In the popular press, it was well documented how pundits and politicians interpreted the cartoon, with disparate readings attributed to the powerful visual symbolism and the lack of text in the *New Yorker* cartoon. But it is still unclear how other audiences deconstructed the cartoon's message. Consequently, this study set out to discover how audiences read the *New Yorker's* Obama cover. It examines how audiences interpreted the meaning of the text, how they perceived the effect that it had on the 2008 campaign, as well as the perceived value that it had on political discourse.

First, the article examines the symbolism encoded in the cartoon and the producer's intent, as well as the response of the news and politicians. Second, the article discusses the research tradition of reception studies, specifically of political cartoons. The third part of the article discusses Q methodology and its role in reception studies, followed by an analysis of the data and a discussion on the implications of the findings.

The Media's Reaction to the *New Yorker*'s Obama Cover

In July of 2008, the *New Yorker*'s cover featured a cartoon drawn by Barry Blitt. In 16 years working with the magazine, Blitt had contributed over 40 covers. His cover art has included provocative illustrations of Iranian President Ahmadinejad sitting in a public stall receiving an invitation for sex (similar to the incident involving U.S. Senator Larry Craig), another of U.S. President George W. Bush in a flooded Oval Office after Hurricane Katrina, and another featuring Martin Luther King

* The magazine cover can be found at http://www.newyorker.com/online/covers/slideshow_blittcovers#slide=1

attempting to hail a cab (New Yorker, n.d).

The title of Blitt's July 2008 cartoon was *Politics of Fear*. The fist-bumping gesture was one the Obamas had often used at political events. Blitt included it because fist-bumping had been reported to be a greeting used by members of al Qaida (Lapidos, 2008).

Blitt's intent was to mock the lies about the Obamas that had been circulated (such as that he was a secret Muslim, anti-American, not born in America, and that he wanted Africans Americans to receive reparations from the government for its role in the slave trade). Blitt intended for this cover to be like many other cartoons that appear in the liberal leaning magazine—a parody and social critique that held a mirror up to prejudice. Blitt stated that the cartoon was to show that conservative branding of the Obamas as unpatriotic was "fear-mongering ridiculousness" (Pitney, 2008). But unfortunately, this cartoon was not accompanied by any text explaining his intent. Instead, it was filled with strong imagery and multiple levels of signification open to interpretation. As Blitt's contemporary Keith Knight critiqued, "You shouldn't have to know . . . the [*New Yorker*] in order to get it" (Garofoli, 2008).

There was a strong reaction to this text. Both the Obama and the McCain campaigns condemned the cartoon and the magazine's choice to publish it. The Obama campaign felt that "Most readers will see it as tasteless and offensive. And we agree" (Allen, 2008). The McCain campaign said that it was "totally inappropriate" (Mooney, 2008). *The Huffington Post*, an online magazine with liberal leanings, claimed that this cartoon could be used against Obama: "Anyone who's tried to paint Obama as a Muslim, anyone who's tried to portray Michelle as angry or a secret revolutionary out to get Whitey, anyone who has questioned their patriotism—well, here's your image" (Sklar, 2008). As Jack Tapper of ABC News opined, "It's a recruitment poster for the right wing" (Tapper, 2008). There may have been some validity to this, as one online poll from a conservative news site found that 60% of respondents reported that the cartoon was "not too far from the truth" (Page, 2008).

Michael Eric Dyson, a Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University, said that the cartoonist's strategy to mock conservatives backfired: "Intent of the mockery is obscured by the busyness of the interpretation that surrounds the art. . . . we've got to be clear that we're not reinforcing the very pathology we seek to oppose or to highlight" (PBS News, 2008). As Eric Bates of *Rolling Stone* magazine commented, "I think it's clear from the response that a lot of people didn't get the joke" (PBS News, 2008).

Obviously, the *New Yorker*'s cover was a hot news story in July of 2008. The story was newsworthy and interesting and would have been

covered no matter when it was published. But the timing of the publication garnered it even more attention. The 2008 Democratic primary campaign had been the longest in history. Candidates began to announce their candidacy in early 2007, and the Democratic primaries were a hotly contested race between Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton that lasted until the final primary in June of 2008. Moreover, this election year was the first time that either party would put a candidate on the top of the ticket that was either African American or female (Balz, 2011). Thus, for a year and a half, the several news networks that run on a 24/7 news cycle had plenty of material for air to attract and keep large viewing audiences. Fortunately for political punditry, the *New Yorker's* Obama cover gave them a goldmine of stories and analysis.

As expected, the news media created conflict by painting the cartoon as offensive and unethical. Interestingly, many in the media, who often used "free speech" as a shield, called for the *New Yorker* to be boycotted and for editors to step down (Mooney, 2008). The news media also made many claims about how people would interpret the text and the effect it would have, but rarely was it backed with empirical data. Finally, the news media took an elitist position often claiming that the masses (specifically conservatives) would not be savvy enough to understand the intent of the cartoonist, believing: "I get it, but I don't trust the people in Kansas to get it" (Garofoli, 2008).

Interpreting Media Messages: Reception Analysis

Research into how audiences interpret media messages "saw a veritable boom in the production of audience ethnographies" in the 1980s and 1990s, when the seminal works in the field of critical cultural studies were published (Morley, 2006, p. 102). But since that time, there has not been a whole lot of applied research in the area, with much of the writing being "quite theoretical as it engages many of the central methodological quandaries in the social sciences, including the debate between qualitative and quantitative research" (Press, 2006, p. 94). The following review examines three major theoretical contributions to the field of audience reception over the last forty years: a) encoding/decoding of messages; b) polysemic and polyvalent texts; and c) four modes of audience engagement.

Critical Cultural Studies: Hegemonic Power of Media Institutions

As Hall (1999) argues, content producers must exist within the overall framework of the dominant culture. The media is part of that dominant culture, since it produces the cultural commodities of that culture. Thus, the texts it produces are most often meant to reinforce the dominant ideology. Consequently, content producers will encode their texts with the dominant ideologies (such as stereotypes), often without any intent of doing so (Hall, 1980). More often, "[the] function [of a media text] . . .

is not, then, the function its creator intended but rather the action the image communicates" (Foss, 1994, p. 216). Ultimately, the dominant culture's power is reinforced when messages are decoded as the preferred reading of the dominant ideology, such as the case with stereotypical depictions (Hall, 1980). Hall also argued that audiences could sometimes redefine the meaning of the message, through either a negotiated or oppositional reading. Negotiated readings would understand the preferred hegemonic meaning, but reinterpret the text to reflect internal interests and situational factors. An oppositional reading would occur within an alternative framework and the text would be reinterpreted as a resistance message to serve the needs of the marginalized person(s) (Hall, 1999).

The Active Audience: Polysemic and Polyvalent Messages

But other audience-centered research has argued that media consumers are not simply absorbing messages, but instead use personal ideologies in order to decode texts (Condit, 1989). Audience research over the last three decades has revealed that individual audience members are in fact active, selective and self-motivated (Johnson, del Rio, & Kemmitt, 2010). As a result, audiences do not decode texts in a uniform fashion (Radway, 1984). Scholars have identified media texts as polysemic (Fiske, 1986). This means that media texts will carry multiple meanings that can be separately decoded by audience members because of the various contexts and receivers that are at play (Newcomb, 1984).

Other critical cultural scholars argue that media texts are not so much polysemic as they are polyvalent, meaning they will be understood the same way by audience members, but will be evaluated differently (Johnson et al., 2010). The concept of polyvalence holds that "it is not a multiplicity or instability of textual meanings but rather a difference in audience evaluations of shared denotations that best accounts for two viewers' discrepant interpretations" (Condit, 1989, pp. 106–107). Polysemy and polyvalence may not be mutually exclusive, as interpretation and evaluation are intertwined when the multicultural audiences are the ones decoding messages (Morley, 2006).

Condit (1989) argues that "[t]he [critical cultural studies'] emphasis on the polysemous quality of texts . . . may be overdrawn. The claim needs to be scaled back to indicate that responses and interpretations are generally polyvalent, and texts themselves are occasionally or partially polysemic" (p. 107). Condit is arguing that texts are not completely wide-open to interpretation and that texts are still decoded within the overarching framework of the dominate culture. Consequently, a text's ambiguity can actually reinforce the hegemonic order, rather than serve the interests of marginalized groups (Carragee, 2003). Morley argued that many studies have:

> wrongly romanticized the supposed power and freedoms of media consumers, imagining that all audiences everywhere are engaged in a continuous form of "semiological guerrilla warfare" . . . with the media, in which they constantly produce oppositional readings of its products. (Morley, 2006, p. 102)

A Comprehensive Model: The Four Modes of Audience Engagement

More recently, in response to the lack of grounded audience reception theory, Michelle (2007) has attempted to create a more systematic framework to categorize dominant modes of audience reception of media texts. In her meta-analysis of reception studies, she categorized four different modes of consumer readings. The first mode is *transparent*, where a consumer suspends his or her disbelief and gets 'lost' in the fictional world of the text. The second mode is *referential*, where a consumer compares the texts to his or her own true life knowledge, experiences and worldview. The third mode is *mediated*, where a consumer interprets a text based upon its aesthetics and his or her own media production literacy. The final mode is *discursive*, where a consumer analyzes meaning (content, motivation and implication) and value (dominant, negotiated, or oppositional) of the message (Michelle, 2007, p. 194).

Michelle (2007) contends that the four different modes may not be exclusive nor are they consistent between media texts, even for the same individual. Furthermore, within each mode there is polyvalence as consumers will interpret the same texts differently (high quality or poor quality aesthetics, good or bad message, etc.). Most importantly, unlike the earlier approaches, this model takes a holistic approach to message production and transmission as well as audience reception. Michelle also argues that with this model, it may be possible that reception studies "provide a common language with which to speak to each other about what is, and is not, typical as opposed to idiosyncratic, and on that basis to formulate general principles that rely on more solid foundations than interesting but largely anecdotal examples" (Michelle, 2007, p. 216).

Interpreting Media Messages: Satire and Political Cartoons

In the last decade, satirical media texts in popular culture have gained great importance in political communication with works such as *Daily Show, Colbert Report, Saturday Night Live, The Onion,* and *Funny or Die.* There has been a multitude of studies with a critical textual analysis or extensive quantitative approach. But there has been a lack of reception research on how audiences decode such content (Johnson et al., 2010).

In order to decode a satirical piece, a consumer must be aware of its dual nature: the actual message (a mockery of reality) and its call-to-

action (which is usually the opposite of the actual image) (Burke, 2003). But in reality, the consumer of the text does not always recognize (or ignores) the dual meaning and instead reads the text to coincide with predetermined ideologies. Consequently, critics fear that most satirical texts will backfire. The two main concerns are: a) the audience will not be sophisticated enough to understand the text; or b) the message of the text will be interpreted in a way that is oppositional to the producer's intended meaning (Johnson et al., 2010). Thus, the author's use of "ironic satire as a rhetorical strategy to debunk a position" is inconsistent at best (Gring-Pemble & Watson, 2003, p. 133).

Satirical political cartoons have a long and storied history. They have helped shape the national image through a simple form of art (Edwards & Ware, 2005). Political cartoons flourished during the 1800s, after the advent of public education and prior to the advent of electronic media. The works of Blanche Ames, Cornelia Barnes, Bernhard Gillam, Joseph Keppler, Thomas Nast, and Ida Proper filled the media landscape with scathing cartoons that exposed contemporary scandals such as government corruption. Their work was often the draw for many newspapers readers, but as a commentary on the status quo, it also drew great criticism. For example, Thomas Nast, revered today as the standard-bearer for political cartoonists, was widely criticized in his time for producing cartoons that did not accord with Victorian sensibilities towards civility and gentility (Baird, 2010). Today, this criticism of Nast's satire seems ridiculous in light of contemporary political discourse.

Political cartoons are an exaggerated and unrestrained form of social criticism. They use humor devices such as irony, hyperbole, farce or absurdity (Gamson & Stuart, 1992). Because of their nature (1-3 frames, limited text), political cartoons can rarely be an in-depth analysis of cultural norms, political policy, or causes to social ills. Instead, the cartoons must rely on popular symbols and stereotypes as their language (Yaqub, 2009). Consequently, cartoons can become very controversial when interpreted by an unintended audience, especially an unintended audience in a different cultural context (Muller, Ozcan, & Seizov, 2009). Moreover, creators of controversial texts based in bigotry can defend their work by claiming it is simple satire.

Like all media texts, political cartoons are also polysemic/polyvalent texts open to many readings and evaluations. Though the artwork is often simple, the messages are often complex. Thus, a political cartoon requires a consumer to be literate in the genre's grammar as well as the specific text's context. A consumer must be literate in current events, history and cultural symbols as well as possess critical thinking skills. Even though cartoonists use many widely known cultural symbols, the

cartoonist will still be using his or her own interpretation of a symbol. Thus, there is low literacy with political cartoons. For consumers, the political cartoon is the most difficult media text in which to interpret the intended meaning (El Refaie, 2009; Kinsey & Taylor, 1982).

Political cartoons can be potent, if not incendiary, especially when the text includes topics that society finds to be taboo. For example, in 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* printed 12 editorial cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad, including one that portrayed the prophet as a terrorist with a bomb in his turban. The publication spurred protests by Muslim groups in Denmark and around the world because Islamic law prohibits the graphic depiction of the prophet. The protests led to violence and resulted in over 100 deaths (including the bombing of the Danish embassy in Syria) (CNN, 2006). The publication and protest became international news and actually led to the republishing of the pictures in several other outlets.

Critics of the cartoon called it blasphemous and illustrative of western ethnocentrism and ignorance of other cultures (Anderson, 2006). The newspaper claimed to have published the cartoons as a response to the on-going debate about the rise of Muslim population (and culture) in Europe. European views on the immigrant Muslim community range from acceptance, to criticism of perceived Islamic values (censorship and women's rights), to a threat to established European society (Yilmaz, 2011). Interestingly, the Danish newspaper and the cartoonist both claimed that the cartoon was misunderstood and it was not meant to be offensive, rather it was meant to be a critique of Islamic extremism (Carsten, 2006). Yet, in 2003, the same newspaper was reluctant to publish less incendiary cartoons depicting Jesus, because the company believed that would have been offensive to the readers (*Spiegel Online*, 2006).

The intent of the newspaper was subordinate, as throughout the world, commentators used their own ideological filters to interpret the text. Many westerners defended the cartoon as a practice of the romanticized right toward free speech and free press (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007). Non-westerners argued that the cartoon was analogous to a cartoon depicting Jesus molesting children in order to lampoon the scandal within the Catholic Church (Hussain, 2007).

In an analysis of the reaction to the publication and subsequent protests, scholars found the debate was framed in three ways: a) Libertarian perspective—the issue was centered around the right to free speech and free press; b) Conflict perspective—the issue was centered around the clash between two different cultures; and c) Intolerance perspective—the issue was centered around the anti-Muslim sentiments. Undoubtedly, the three perspectives reflected the multiple

meanings within the cartoon text, both intended and unintended. But, it also represents the multiple filters that existed within the multicultural audience (Strombeck, Shehata, & Dimitrova, 2008).

Methodology

A purpose-driven analysis focuses on the intent of the producers, whereas a function-driven analysis emphasizes the message as it is interpreted by the consumer (Hosein, 2010). Many rhetorical and critical culture studies are purpose-driven and examine the producer's intent with the assumption that the producer is promoting a preferred reading of the dominant culture. Reception studies are function-driven and examine the consumers' interpretations with the assumption that consumers negotiate meaning (Fiske, 1986).

Q methodology is an appropriate approach to studying how consumers interpret media messages because it is a methodology that studies subjectivity. In the later part of his career, William Stephenson applied Q methodology widely to the study of mass communication (Stephenson, 1995–1996). Q methodology is appropriate because "although media institutions disseminate texts, whether for information or persuasive purposes, ultimately individuals are the consumers of those texts. And ultimately, individual perceptions and interpretations reveal true meaning, no matter what may have been intended" (Esrock, 2005, p. 249). Thus, measuring subjectivity is necessary, since there is variability in how texts are read, only limited by the producers' construction of the message and the cultural context that they both exist within (Carlson & Trichtinger, 2001). Q methodology has been used in several studies of consumers' reading of political cartoons (Bormann, Koester, & Bennett, 1978; Kinsey & Taylor, 1982; Root, 1995; Trahair, 2003). Accordingly, this study uses Q methodology to interpret the following research questions: How do audiences interpret the meaning and effect of the *New Yorker*'s Obama cover? How do audiences perceive the value the cover has had on political discourse?

Research Design

This study was designed to assess consumers' readings of the *New Yorker*'s Obama cover. The statements were drawn from popular press articles and political blogs that were written in July of 2008 (several of which were mentioned above). The researcher examined 82 articles from blogs and popular press sites (such as ABCNews.com, FOXNews.com, *Huffington Post, New York Times*, and *Politico*) that pertained to the Obama cover. From those articles, the author conducted a thematical analysis of statements about the perceived meaning, value and effect of the cartoon. In all, 40 reoccurring themes were derived. Single words or quotes that best reflected those 40 them were chosen to

make up the Q sample.

The respondents were from a midsize Midwestern public university and represented the fields of law, political science and journalism. Respondents from these three fields of study were chosen because they are more likely to be familiar with the media ethics, free speech and political communication issues that permeated the post-publication debate in the popular press. There were 25 Q sorters, 15 males and 10 females. The average age was 25.5 years old. Apart from a 61-year-old respondent, the ages ranged from 19 to 34 years old. Between August and October of 2008, the respondents were asked to sort the statements from"'agree" to "do not agree." Additionally, the respondents were given a short questionnaire about their political ideology, trust in the news media, and their opinion about the extent of First Amendment protection.

Findings

Three factors were extracted, each of which had at least six significant loadings. Thirteen respondents loaded on Factor A, nine respondents loaded on Factor B, and six respondents on Factor C. Three respondents were confounded, loading on two separate factors.

Perspective I: Et Tu *New Yorker*?

The most apt description of Perspective I would be that it was disappointed in the *New Yorker* magazine, because the magazine was supposed to be one of them—liberal and progressive. Barack Obama was this perspective's candidate and for the *New Yorker* to publish such a cartoon was near blasphemy.

This perspective saw the cartoon as unsophisticated. In fact, they believe that it was tasteless and offensive and crossed the line beyond satire. They also believed that critics of the cartoon were not being too politically correct. Perspective I was also concerned about their candidate, as this was not just a simple cartoon with little effect. Rather, this cartoon would have a negative effect on the Obama campaign because it perpetuated inaccurate stereotypes, it was a distortion of the truth, and ultimately it was fear-mongering. This perspective also believed that this cartoon had a negative impact on the magazine itself and that the editors of the magazine should make better decisions.

Ultimately, Perspective I felt that what the *New Yorker* did was unpatriotic. This perspective believed that the media should not publish such images and that these are not the issues that need to be considered. Finally, the perspective believed that this was not appropriate practice of free speech (See the Appendix for the complete factor array.)

One interesting note about Perspective I was that it perceived the cartoon as being clearly absurd and over the top. When combined with

the other scores, such as the rejection of this cartoon as being close to the truth, it seems as though this perspective was simply denying the validity of the cartoon's message, rather than whether or not *others* would believe it to be true.

The respondents that loaded on this factor commented that they were offended by the cartoon. They felt that the cartoon did a disservice to both Barack Obama and our political system. Interestingly, of the 13 significant loadings, six were Democrats and three were liberal independents/Republicans. All four African Americans who were respondents in this study loaded on this factor. There were five respondents who reported supporting Obama in the election, only two were for McCain. Eight of the thirteen self-reported as being very interested and active in politics. And eight of the thirteen agreed that the First Amendment should be absolute.

Perspective I was disappointed that the *New Yorker* published the cartoon and the magazine was irresponsible in doing this to "their guy." Perspective I believes that this cartoon was polarizing, but the perspective does not believe that the cartoon was unfair to Republicans that do hold this view. Instead, the concern was that it will hurt Obama and increase intolerance.

Perspective II: You Take the Bitter with the Sweet

Perspective II believes in the free marketplace of ideas. Though some media products are controversial, it comes with having a free press. No matter the value of the speech, as long as it adds more information for us to consume, then it is a good thing; in fact, it is patriotic. For Perspective II, this cartoon was an appropriate practice of free speech, and the media should publish such images because it may bring up issues that do need to be discussed. Certainly, no one should protest to the *New Yorker* nor should the employees be fired over this. Ultimately, the editors made sound judgments in publishing this cover.

Perspective II also believed that the cartoon was clearly pointed sarcasm and parody. It was certain that the magazine was protected from any defamation lawsuit. It was just a cartoon and critics were being too politically correct. In no way was this supposed to be literal. In reality, the *New Yorker* magazine was simply a company trying to sell a product. The fact that this cartoon was placed on the cover without any text was an obvious attempt to create buzz and sell magazines.

The respondents who loaded on this factor commented that the cartoon was a little unclear, but the cartoon was not that shocking. They have certainly seen worse on the internet.

Of the nine respondents on this factor, five were in journalism programs and four were in law school. Among the respondents, there was a split in ideology and party affiliation. There was also higher self-

reporting of political activity, political interest and media involvement. Six of the nine believed that the First Amendment should be absolute, the media does a poor job covering elections, and the United States is too politically correct.

These findings suggest that the underlying principle for this perspective was the belief in free speech and free press (free from government, social, and market forces). This perspective does not put a value on the cartoon's message. Instead they celebrate the fact that the discussion was started. Despite the perspective's belief in a free press, it does recognize that the media is a business and maybe this magazine cover had more to do with selling magazines, than it did with making a point.

Perspective III: Now That you Brought it Up...

Perspective III was bipolar with two of the six respondents loading negatively on the factor. The positive loadings make up Perspective III. This perspective was also offended by the cartoon, but for reasons different than Perspective I. For Perspective III this cartoon was offensive to conservatives. For example, conservatives do not really believe that Obama is a terrorist with ties to al Qaida. But, Perspective III did feel that there are important issues being brought to attention by this cartoon, such as whether Obama is really a Muslim. For Perspective III, there was an unfamiliar partner in this examination of Obama—the *New Yorker* magazine.

Perspective III found this political cartoon to be unsophisticated. It was another example of the media's liberal bias. The *New Yorker* unfairly smeared Republicans as holding this perception. Perspective III believed that this cartoon would hurt the McCain campaign more than it would hurt the Obama campaign. Moreover, the perspective felt that it was unpatriotic for the *New Yorker* to question those who have legitimate concerns about the direction of the country and conservatives are justified in their outrage towards the magazine.

Yet, on the other hand, Perspective III believed that the *New Yorker* brought up issues that needed to be discussed, because they may not be too far from the truth; Obama certainly should not sue for defamation. To Perspective III this was not just a cartoon. It was significant and had much to do with the presidency. The perspective felt that the media should publish such images to stir debate about the candidates. The perspective believed that the *New Yorker* was being responsible in practicing its free-press rights as a watchdog over politicians and no one should be fired over this.

The respondents who loaded on this factor stated that they believed the cartoon presented a stereotype of conservatives. But, it did bring to the surface some very important political issues. Thus, the *New Yorker*

had done a great service to political discourse.

Three of the positive loadings on Perspective III identified as conservative or Republican (the two respondents who negatively loaded identified as Democrat or independent). Three of the positive loadings claim to be McCain supporters, whereas the two negative loadings were Obama supporters. All six of the respondents self-reported having high political involvement and media use. Five of the six reported that the media does a poor job covering elections.

These findings suggest that Perspective III is a conservative or Republican viewpoint of the cartoon. The respondents report high media use, consumption of conservative news shows, and feel that other media outlets have a liberal bias. Ironically, from this perspective, the *New Yorker* was doing the conservatives' bidding. Although this perspective rejected the tone of the cartoon as being offensive to conservatives, the perspective felt that the cartoon was justly provocative. Ultimately, Perspective III felt that the *New Yorker* was being journalistic in bringing up the issues.

Perspective IV: Not a Big Deal... But You Should Not Have Done It

The negative loadings on Perspective III (referred to here as Perspective IV) reflected a second liberal or Democratic viewpoint. According to this viewpoint, the cartoon is not offensive as it reflects the actual conservative bias toward Obama, thus conservatives have no right to be upset. They would also argue that it is just a cartoon and it will not hurt either campaign. This cartoon is a parody of those beliefs, not an accurate depiction of Obama. But they would also agree that it was irresponsible of the *New Yorker* to publish such stereotypes, even if it is about conservatives, because it may give the wrong message.

Table 1 presents a comparison of the different perspectives' views on the message, the effect of the message, and evaluation of the Editor's decision.

Table 1: Factor Comparisons

	I	*II*	*III*	*IV*
Message	Offensive	Parody	Offensive	Parody
Effect	Perpetuates stereotypes	Promotes discourse	Promotes discourse	It is just a cartoon
Decision	Irresponsible	Responsible	Responsible	Irresponsible

Discussion

This reception analysis is an exploratory study into the social construction of the *New Yorker's* Obama cover, asking respondents to describe the meaning, value and effect of the cartoon. This study found four prevalent readings of the cartoon. The diverse readings show that like most media texts, the Obama cover was very ambiguous. Thus, as

argued by Morley (2006), the text was both polysemic (offensive stereotype versus a pointed parody) and polyvalent (perpetuates stereotypes versus promoting discourse, and irresponsible versus responsible). Certainly, this study challenges the simple encoding/decoding understanding of message interpretation, where audiences most often take a preferred reading of the text (Hall 1980). Moreover, there was not a finding of "romanticized . . . power and freedoms of media consumers" reinterpreting the text to produce oppositional readings, as Perspective I, II and III read stereotypes in the message (Morley, 2006, p. 102).

The findings were more in accordance with Michelle's (2007) Composite Model of Reception. The four perspectives did have multiple modes of reception: mostly referential and discursive, with limited transparent and mediated. Of course, this study was only concerned with referential and discursive modes, as transparent modes would rarely occur with a single frame.

Persepctives I & III: Discursive Readings, Partisan Filters, and a Hostile Media Effect

For Perspectives I & III the discursive reading was paramount. Though the two perspectives focused on meaning of the cartoon, both of them rejected the producer's intended message of parody. (Perspective II dismissed it as an attempt to increase sales, leaving only the Perspective IV to read the cartoon as a true parody.) Ultimately, the study shows that it is not the producer's intent or the hegemonic media that dictates meaning construction, but instead it is an amalgam of the producer's intent, the consumers' filters and the socio-cultural context (Esrock, 2005).

Every consumer will interpret messages through his or her own personal filters of knowledge, experiences and lifestyle. Furthermore, meaning making is a *social* reality that is often based upon factors such as the individuals' "demographic characteristics, social group memberships and discursive affiliations" (Michelle, Davis, & Vladica, 2012, p. 117). In this study, the P set was chosen to represent those trained in journalism, law and political science in a hope to see how those in the respective fields interpreted the impact of the cartoon on politics, media, and free speech. But, the findings suggest that it was not the respondent's occupational choice, but rather his or her personal political identity that was the stronger indicator of loading on a factor. It is understandable that political ideology would be a very strong indicator because politics is emotional and emotions are the strongest filters (Vaes, Paladino, & Magagnotti, 2011).

When emotions are at play we are less likely to step back and interpret a message logically—this is just a cartoon, the cartoonist was

not trying to be literal, Obama is not really a terrorist, etc. Instead we fall back on raw emotions and illogical analysis. Similar to cognitive dissonance/resonance (Festinger, 1957) or the "hostile media effect" (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), we see what we want to see. In this case, the perspectives saw that the *New Yorker* was hurting their respective candidates, even if they disagreed about the veracity of the underlying message.

Thus, as critics of satire feared, the cartoon did backfire. It was misinterpreted by both sides of the political aisle. But not because the audience was unsophisticated, rather because both Perspective I and Perspective III interpreted it in a way that best fit their worldview. Yet, unfortunately for the magazine, three of the four readings were oppositional to the producer's intended meaning (Johnson et al., 2010. In fact for the positive loaders on Perspective III, their reading may have reinforced the hegemonic order (stereotypes, jingoism, fear of the other), rather than serve the interests of the marginalized groups (Carragee, 2003) whom the cartoonist was certainly intending to promote.

Perspective II & IV: Mediated Reading, Principle Filter, and a Third Person Effect

The political emotion and cultural politics of this particular election was the strongest factor for those in Perspective I and III. Those perspectives walked their respective party lines. But for Perspectives II & IV it was not an emotionally charged issue, or at least these perspectives did not let it become one. For these two perspective it was the medium (and what it represented), not so much the message, that was important.

For Perspective II, their filter was the belief in the abstract principle of free speech. There is no doubt that people on this perspective have personal political leanings and support a candidate. But, with this particular cartoon, Perspective II does not care too much for the politics of the message. They left the message of the text to be considered by partisans, and others who are affected by media messages. Instead, this perspective celebrated the perceived practice of free speech and delved into the *New Yorker's* practices as a media company and the bottom line of selling magazines.

Regardless of the media text that was examined, a factor similar to Perspective II would probably be extracted. If similar issues about free speech (obscenity, political correctness, civility, etc.) were studied, there would undoubtedly be a perspective that promotes free speech, such as in the case of the Danish Newspaper's cartoon depicting Mohammad (Strombeck et al., 2008). But this perspective would probably oscillate depending on the particular text, cultural context and P sample. For example, a similar study on the Westboro Baptist Church may have

fewer respondents loading on this perspective, especially after incidents such as the shooting of Rep. Gabby Giffords. Or if we consider the incident with the Danish Newspaper's cartoon depicting the prophet Mohammad, the free speech perspective may be very small in non-Western countries, but much larger in the United States. Once again, the evaluation would depend upon the dominant ideology in that culture as well as the individual and contextual factors (Condit, 1989).

Belief in the right to free speech is an almost universal ideal for Americans, but the interpretation of how much free speech should be allowed will differ greatly. We can assume that Perspectives I and III believe in the ideal of free speech just as much as Perspective II, but like for most partisans, they may believe in "free speech for me, but not for thee." Perspective II extends that ideal for the *New Yorker* and the ambiguous cartoon that contained highly charged rhetoric. But, in the post-study survey, there were few on this perspective who would say free speech is absolute.

Perspective IV respondents were Democrats who supported Obama. They used a partisan filter and read the message of the cartoon to be against conservatives who held the beliefs portrayed in the cartoon. But, unlike Perspective I (the other liberal reading), Perspective IV's mediated reading trumped the discursive reading. So, although they perceived the cartoon as a well-done parody, to them it was still just a cartoon. Nonetheless, they did warn against the false stereotypes about Obama and ultimately judged that it was irresponsible for the *New Yorker* to publish it because it could have an effect on others—what is known as a third-person effect.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the media producer's intent is just one variable in the process of the meaning construction of a text. In the political commentary following the publication, there was fear that the message would persuade others to believe that Obama was a secret terrorist who hated America. But none of the perspectives found in this study felt as if they were persuaded by the message. Moreover, editorialists in the news media had quickly taken over the message and reinterpreted it, so that it best fit their (political) narrative. The producer's intended meaning (and its effect) never materialized because the *New Yorker* had lost control of the message.

Fortunately for the *New Yorker*, the Obama cover was soon forgotten. Only a month later both of the parties had their national convention. Quickly, the news media turned its interest onto the Republican nomination for Vice President—Sarah Palin. Analysis and commentary on Palin far outnumbered the attention that was given to the *New Yorker's* political cartoon. And once again, the interpretations of Sarah

Palin (mama grizzly versus ditzy incompetent) were split along party lines and ideologies (Washburn & Washburn, 2011).

So, for texts like the *New Yorker's* Obama Cover, which are often accused of having great power and effect, the truth is that any media text is just a tool, not an omnipotent political player. Instead, it is how the audience (including the news media that frames the issue) interprets it and reconstructs the message that will determine its meaning. But, the producer's intended message is not irrelevant. It is just one variable in the message construction (Johnson et al., 2010). So, the bottom line for a political cartoonist who wants to have an effect on the political discourse: do not make a cartoon so ambiguous.

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Appendix: Statements and Factor Array

		Perspectives		
		I	*II*	*III*
1	Pointed sarcasm and parody	1	4	2
2	Makes the *New Yorker* look bad	2	1	−3
3	Fear-mongering	3	−2	0
4	A great political cartoon in the tradition of Thomas Nast	−2	1	−2
5	Unpatriotic	3	−3	3
6	Tasteless and offensive	4	−2	1
7	Smears Republicans/conservatives	−2	−2	2
8	Appropriate practice of free speech	−3	3	4
9	Not a very well thought out picture—unclear what the message is	−1	2	2
10	Incendiary	2	1	0
11	More publicizing of extremist views	1	0	1
12	Clearly absurd and over the top	4	1	−1
13	An example of the media's liberal bias	−1	0	3
14	Brings up issues that need to be considered	−3	2	4
15	Just an attempt to create buzz and sell the magazine	2	4	0
16	It crossed the line beyond being simple satire	2	−3	−2
17	Hypocritical	1	−1	−1
18	Perpetuating stereotypes/fear	4	2	1
19	Sophisticated	−4	0	−3
20	Media should publish such images to stir debate and criticism	−4	3	2
21	Hurts the McCain campaign	−1	−1	4
22	Marginalizes similar viewpoints	0	−1	−2
23	Critics are being too politically correct	−3	2	−2
24	Gives credibility to fear politics	0	−1	0
25	Hurts the Obama campaign	0	−1	−1
26	Media has a responsibility not to publish such inflammatory images	1	−4	−3
27	People should protest or boycott the magazine	−2	−4	−1
28	It is of little significance; I was mostly unaware of it before this	−1	0	−3
29	Obama should sue for defamation	−2	−3	−4
30	The outrage is justified	0	−2	2
31	It is just a cartoon	−3	3	−4
32	The *New Yorker* editors should make better decisions	3	−2	0

		Perspectives		
		I	II	III
33	A product of the media monster; anything to create buzz	1	4	1
34	The cartoonist/editors should be fired	−1	−4	−2
35	Mocking bigotry	0	3	−1
36	Misinformation	3	0	0
37	Polarizing politics as usual	2	1	1
38	Unfairly paints Republicans as holding this viewpoint	−2	2	3
39	This has nothing to do with the presidency	0	0	−4
40	Not too far from the truth	−4	−3	3