

Episode: Ethics Talk Videocast Transcript – Politics, Policy, and COVID Cartoons

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TIM HOFF: Welcome to *Ethics Talk*, the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics* podcast on ethics in health and health care. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This episode is an audio version of a video interview conducted by the Journal's editor in chief, Dr Audiey Kao, with Matt Wuerker. Matt Wuerker is the staff cartoonist for *Politico* and the winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in editorial cartooning. He joined us to talk about his artistic process in creating cartoons that speak to matters of policy and politics arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. To watch the full video interview, head to our site, JournalofEthics.org, or visit our [YouTube channel](#).

DR AUDIEY KAO: Matt, welcome to *Ethics Talk*. [music fades out]

MATT WUERKER: Hey! Nice to meet you. Great to be here.

KAO: So, in line with its mission to illuminate the art of medicine, the *AMA Journal of Ethics* leverages the power of the visual arts to augment readers' understandings of important questions in ethics and health policy. Can you help our viewers better understand the conceptual and planning part of your creative process as an editorial cartoonist?

WUERKER: Well, let me just say that I think that there's a lot of different ways to share information in a visual fashion, but I know that I'm a little bit biased here. But I think that a political cartoon is a great combination of visual interest, hopefully a little bit of sort of data graphic mixed in, coated with a little bit of humor or maybe a lot of humor. And it's a really effective vehicle for communicating an idea, hopefully a complex idea. The old saw obviously, a picture's worth a thousand words, I think is really true. Because I think that you can get a lot through a visual image in a matter of seconds that would be the same as minutes of reading a written piece.

KAO: So, following up on what you just said, do you see an ethics dimension in your role and responsibilities as *Politico*'s editorial cartoonists?

WUERKER: You know, of course I do. And I mean, the first place I'd start is that I feel it's very important to stick to true facts and not be part of, I think one of the growing problems we have in American politics is sorting out truth from lies, propaganda from agitation, things like that. So, I would like to think that the work that I do contributes to sticking to the facts and dealing with true issues.

It's a different time for political cartoonists. I mean, we've been around for centuries, and for the better part of the last couple centuries, we worked with publications that had gatekeepers: editors, publishers who sort of held you to certain ethical standards or journalistic standards. And these days, a whole lot of political cartooning is done on social media. So, there's no, there's very little adult supervision. Let's put it that way.

KAO: Yeah.

WUERKER: And so, it's important for cartoonists to hold them to some standards. You'll see stuff going out there where people are contributing to crazy stuff like QAnon conspiracy theories and the like. And that, to me, is incredibly reckless. So, job one for a political cartoonist is to deal with facts and hopefully in a civil manner.

KAO: Yeah. So, how our government and the American public at large have responded to COVID-19 have provided, I think, plenty of fodder for cartoonists. How do you approach cartooning a topic as serious as a pandemic that has affected millions and killed hundreds of thousands in the U.S.?

WUERKER: It's a fine line, you know. Political cartoonists actually deal with fairly heavy issues all the time, issues of war and peace and things like that. A pandemic is sort of in that same category. And I personally, and most of the cartoonists I know and respect, work at trying to contribute to the debate, maybe bring a certain amount of levity to it, but never go over the line where you're trivializing or causing emotional pain to people who are going through horrible things.

KAO: Yeah.

WUERKER: Sometimes you skate right up to that line. A lot of humor is going right up to the edge of tweaking people. And in situations like COVID, it tests that, but with some sensitivity, you can do that.

KAO: Yeah. So, I'd like to—

WUERKER: Well, I was just going to say one more thing.

KAO: Go ahead.

WUERKER: The old thing about laughter is the best medicine. Doctors may disagree with this, I understand. But it's an old saying, and there's something to it. It's like a little levity, laugh so that we don't cry as we go through stuff that's trying or whatever, like a horrible pandemic like that. I think that that can be also constructive.

KAO: Yeah, no. I think you make a good point. I think humor in medicine can be used, when used appropriately, could be quite therapeutic.

WUERKER: Yeah.

KAO: Yeah.

WUERKER: Exactly.

KAO: So, now I'd like to switch gears a little bit and have you comment on some of your cartoons. So, you've already alluded to this in your earlier points, but misinformation can be deadly during a pandemic. So, what were you trying to convey in these two cartoons that you created?

WUERKER: Well, the first one is dealing with the whole phenomenon of social media. And it's basically, it's a big experiment, a psychological experiment, a political experiment, sociological experiment. We have this big, it's like a big public pool, and everybody can jump in. And everybody can share their information and their opinion or whatever and stuff.

KAO: [chuckling] Right.

WUERKER: But in this case, it's like a big public pool that's full of all sorts of other mischievous characters is how I like to put it.

KAO: [laughs] Right.

WUERKER: And so it was just, again, a lot of what we do as cartoonists is we're trying to find an apt metaphor that illuminates something in a way that where people can see it in a different light.

The other one here is dealing with Donald Trump and the misinformation that's been coming out of the White House about the COVID situation and stuff. And so, it would sometimes, we'll, hang cartoons on the news. So, this was after a couple of particularly horrible tornadoes in the U.S.

KAO: Mm.

WUERKER: And so, in the morning, I sort of compared the devastation of the misinformation, in this case to fact checkers in particular, whose job I do not envy these days. They're working very hard.

KAO: Yeah. No, I appreciate your point. So, this next one, at initial glance, doesn't seem to have much to do with the COVID-19 pandemic. So, what were you trying to convey here?

WUERKER: Again, it gets back to sort of our relationship with truth and science and things like that. A lot of the time a cartoon will be juxtaposing two issues like, hey, we've learned a lesson here with COVID about the importance of listening to scientists and people who know what they're talking about.

KAO: Yeah.

WUERKER: And oh, what's that remind us of? Climate change is a very similar sort of thing where we really need to pay attention to the science if we're going to really address the issue.

KAO: Yeah. Now with this one, it speaks to wearing a face mask has become a political statement for many during this pandemic. So, what were you trying to say with these two cartoons?

WUERKER: Well, there's been, this is basically lampooning the White House's tendency to make light of the pandemic and also make light of the public health guidelines that have been put out. And they were refusing to wear masks—this is a cartoon from a few months ago—but they were basically refusing to wear masks in the White House. In fact, it was sort of a mark of disdain if you showed up with a mask, apparently. And then I was sort of imagining, well, they're trying to put a happy face on the whole situation. So, hopefully, this conveys that.

KAO: And then the second cartoon?

WUERKER: Yeah, the other one is just, you know, everybody recognizes the old trope of Uncle Sam, "I want you."

KAO: Yeah.

WUERKER: And this one was quite popular. This one got picked up quite a bit in social media. Some people sending this off to their Uncle Buck, who was refusing to wear a mask and wasn't with the war on the virus.

KAO: Yeah.

WUERKER: So, it's also, this one's an example in some ways of a lot of cartoons are not necessarily meant to be funny. I mean, cartoonists like me, we are akin to newspaper columnists trying to address serious issues, perhaps in a non-serious way, but nonetheless contributing to sort of the political argument and debate that's going on in the country.

KAO: Yeah. So, this last cartoon speaks about the definition of a pandemic being a global outbreak of disease. What were you trying to convey here in this last cartoon?

WUERKER: Well, this is mostly me just, I really love to draw fire trucks.

KAO: [laughs]

WUERKER: I'm basically [inaudible]. So, it started with the fire truck. No, this was back when, it was Trump was pulling out of the WHO right in the middle of a global pandemic. And my understanding is that we're one of the prime, if not the prime benefactor, supporter of the WHO. And it just, again, a simple analogy, hopefully, that clarifies a dynamic for people in a somewhat humorous way. But this is Trump taking his hose and heading home from the fire truck.

KAO: Yeah. So, for this final segment of our conversation today, Matt, can I ask you to draw an impromptu cartoon so our viewers may gain some better insights into the drawing part of your creative process as an editorial cartoonist?

WUERKER: OK. I'd be happy to do that. I will demonstrate on camera that the first step in a cartoon is really not the drawing; it's the idea. When I was a young cartoonist starting out, my mentor, Paul Conrad, who was a great cartoonist at the *Los Angeles Times*, hammered into my head, it's not the drawing. It's really you've got to come up with a really good concept.

KAO: Mm, yeah.

WUERKER: But knowing that you were going to put me on the spot, I happened to cogitate a little bit.

KAO: [laughs] Okay!

WUERKER: And to demonstrate another part of political cartooning is grabbing sort of a news item that is relatively fresh and responding to it. So, just last night—I'm not sure when this is going to go up online—but just last night we had the vice presidential debate. And like many things in politics, we got all fixated on a strange thing that maybe wasn't the central issue. But the fly. The fly that landed on Vice President Pence's hair and kept sort of hanging out. So, I've been trying to figure out what to do with the fly.

And here, let me pull some paper up here. So, I was imagining what I could do is I could, this is a rough sketch. On camera, I'm not used to doing this. [repeated sounds of marker strokes on paper as he talks] So, I would start with maybe.... Normally when I'm doing a cartoon, I will do three or four or even more rough sketches, pencil sketches, and then overlays with more sketches and things like that. But in this case.... Here's Mike Pence... [continuing to draw] who's got very dark eyebrows, fortunately. And then I was imagining as I was watching the fly last night in the debate, it was this thing that Pence refused to respond to. He was not going to, like, shoo the fly away or do anything like that. He stayed perfectly still, and he just hoped that if he ignored it, then everybody would ignore the fact that there was a big fly on his very white hair. And I was realizing that, in some ways, the fly is like a perfect metaphor for the pandemic.

KAO: Hmm.

WUERKER: That the Vice President was sitting there really hoping that the fly would just fly away, or as President Trump has said, magically disappear. So, fortunately, we have a very graphic virus. Thank you, scientists, who've been taking those pictures of the virus. It's a very, it's a good virus for cartooning. It's very distinctive, and now it's become an icon that everybody recognizes. And so, I was thinking what I can do with a cartoon is I could turn the virus into the fly that Mike Pence really hopes we're not going to notice is sitting right there on his forehead or on his scalp. [continues drawing]

And then I get, I'm old fashioned. I would be very comfortable working in the 19th century as a cartoonist. I would then spend a lot of time doing crosshatching and shading like Thomas Napster when I was a cartoonist, but...something like that.

KAO: Yeah. [laughs] Well, Matt, I appreciate you letting our audience and myself be a fly on the wall of your creative process.

WUERKER: [laughs]

KAO: And on that note, I want to thank Matt Wuerker for sharing his artistic insights with our audience today. Matt, thanks again for being a guest on *Ethics Talk*.

WUERKER: Thank you, Audiey. Real pleasure.

KAO: For more COVID ethics resources, please visit the *AMA Journal of Ethics* at JournalofEthics.org. And finally, to our viewing audience out there, be safe and well. We'll see you next time on *Ethics Talk*. [bright theme music plays]