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# Studying Satire as a Form of Historical Communication: Teaching and Learning with *Punch*

Clare Horrocks

Liverpool John Moores University

Various source media, *Punch* Historical Archive 1841-1992



## Introduction

For many years the main cuts [1] of *Punch* have been widely used as illustrations for histories of the Victorian period and as case studies on the 11 to 18 History Curriculum. However, rarely has the wider breadth of *Punch's* historical record been studied. The main cuts formed only one small part of the character of the magazine, being accompanied by between 8 and 10 pages of text. From full-column satirical sketches to one-line quips, Mr Punch provided a commentary on a wide range of historical phenomena, from the political to the social and cultural. Twentieth century *Punch*, particularly the post Second World War material, has received even less critical attention. For the first time, the *Punch Historical Archive* will make the full range of *Punch's* verbal and visual satire available, providing a rich vein of social commentary for researchers of all types to enjoy and examine. This essay will begin by examining the value of studying satire as a form of historical communication; the second half will then go on to specifically think about how *Punch* can enhance students' critical thinking and historical research skills.

## The Historical Value of Satire - Verbal and Visual

Satire has endured as a cultural tradition from ancient Greek theatre through to contemporary animated programmes like *South Park* and *Family Guy*. As the forms of satire have diversified from stage to print, from image to animated film, the source of the humour has remained constant: human folly and vice. Satire has become the means by which people's foibles are exposed and held up for ridicule, calling that they be held to account for their actions. The butt of the humour can extend from public figures like politicians and ministers to everyday people exposed for their

failings, whether it is their taste in fashion or their preferences in entertainment, for example. It is important though that the origin of the satire is evident, in order that people will 'get the joke'. For readers of magazines like *Punch*, being part of a community that was familiar with particular tropes, or extended and developed jokes, was very much part of the reading experience. For students of the magazine, the origins of its humour provide a vital context for understanding why the subject was chosen as a popular and pertinent topic for satirising. As Neil Kinnock, in an interview with Ben Elton, has acknowledged "good satire is an exaggeration of the truth, it can't be total fiction, it's got to take a truth and then spin it out and string it out and stretch it out, till it becomes absurd, but funny because it has a relationship with what really exists in reality"[2]. It is identifying these relationships that will form the foundation for analysis for future students of *Punch* and users of this Archive.

The visual origins of *Punch's* satire can be traced back to developments in print culture during the 18th century [3]. Satires were used to mediate social and cultural change. Tracing the evolution of 'graphic satire' in the nineteenth century, it is clear that it helped to provide a comic record of London life, revealing a wide variety of urban experiences. The formative period for understanding this change and the shift to a more graphic style of satire came in the years directly preceding *Punch's* first appearance in 1841, located by cultural historian John Marriott to be the period 1815 - 1845. However, as Diana Donald notes, "even a simple visual image could, when mediated by words, attain an immediacy and symbolic force denied to the printed word alone". Satire extended the tradition

of visual intervention which broadened its audience, representing the significance of even local events. From this time a more intricate relationship between the verbal and visual evolved as satirists made extensive use of a variety of popular cultural forms to create accessible meaning for their audience. Marcus Wood identifies a multiplicity of familiar (rather than classical) forms which drew on the rhetoric of "sacred texts, almanacs, press advertisements, chapbooks, children's books, nursery rhymes, games, poems, songs, last wills, dying confessions, playbills and showman's notices." Contributing to this shift, as Wood has suggested, was the new iconographic register of advertising which "popularised, appropriated and imitated different writing styles and systems of iconography". It is this rich variety of different styles that can form the foundation for seminar work on understanding the value of satire as a form of communication.

### **Punch's Legacy**

*Punch*, first published in July 1841, was a different kind of satirical publication and enjoyed quite a diverse popular appeal, because it:

- Satirised a whole cross-section of society, regardless of class or status
- Engaged with the new middle classes
- Made the familiar unfamiliar for comedic effect
- Blurred the boundaries of propriety
- Rewarded regular readers with traditional features and shared frames of reference

The cultural context of the 1840s created new reading experiences and audiences who were able to respond to the verbal-visual depictions of urban life in a way that

was distinctively different to their predecessors in the eighteenth century. Improved literacy across all social groups was a contributory factor in this shift. *Punch* lampooned a cross-section of society; crossing sweepers were depicted alongside politicians and members of the middle class. However, it was the deliberate tensions in such representations that *Punch* made distinctive. More importantly the magazine developed the satirical potential of graphic satire by constructing for its middle-class audience a representation of the elite by using the viewpoint of the imagined masses. *Punch* took the familiar-the London streets and theatres-and made them unfamiliar, blurring the commonly accepted boundaries of propriety. *Punch* succeeded when other periodicals did not because of the range of traditions and customs the writers and artists brought to their work, building, what Brian Maidment has described as, "long-term proto-narratives out of their cartoons". This was a tradition that continued through into the twentieth century, not least through the eponymous figure of Mr Punch himself, guardian and commentator on social and cultural change.

### **Working with Visual Sources as Historical Evidence**

The particularly visual nature of *Punch* has been part of its enduring appeal. Visual sources can help to prompt students into asking more probing contextual questions:

If we find a statement or description in a novel or poem, or some piece of illustration in a painting, which does not seem to be in accordance with the generally accepted picture of the age then we must not overthrow the accepted picture but must seek to check from other sources whether in fact there is any validity in the discrepancy which has been detected in the literary source.

*Introduction to History*, The Open University

The Seminar Case Study for 19th Century *Punch*, available alongside this essay, provides evidence of how I have been using *Punch* in my own teaching as part of a Research Methods course. In the assessment rubric students are asked to "outline how you would proceed with your research". This needs to be done by demonstrating an awareness of the processes involved in identifying a research topic/building an archive/using an archive. The question that tutors should be asking is: "how we can enable our students to become more than merely readers, going on to become active and engaged users?". A lot of this can be achieved by highlighting to students the type of questions that should be asked of their source material. An important part of building the *Punch Historical Archive* has been involving the whole production team in considering HOW and WHY archives are put together in particular ways. This has then been evidenced through a variety of different sources which users can debate and discuss. [4]

Satirical prints and cartoons are visually powerful, quick to catch the eye of the reader, but they are equally valuable as evidence of an important set of dynamic social and political networks of production and consumption. To use them as evidence students need to be aware of the contexts in which they sat: changing technology, production and distribution, competing markets and readerships, and indeed the dynamic that different graphic artists, editors and publishers brought to their work and to the publication as a whole. As critic Timothy Benson states, the immediacy of the visual image is the reason why cartoons are so powerful and why, it can be argued, *Punch* is so important for studying satire as a form of historical communication:

What is a political cartoon? Essentially, it is a visual essay that sums up complicated events or situations in a few, simple, sketched black lines. A newspaper article will probably take several minutes to read; the cartoon delivers the message in a couple of seconds. That is what makes it so powerful . . . They do not simply represent; they comment as well.

Timothy S. Benson, *The Cartoon Century* (2009): p. 9.

### Research Engaged or Research Informed Teaching?: The Student as Producer

I am sure that the majority of academics, regardless of discipline, will at some point have used archives and special collections to develop their research. The rise of the digital archive, which has made accessing historical and rare material so much easier, has brought with it fresh challenges. There is a danger that digital archives can become static platforms, never updated, added to or enhanced as new advancements in the field emerge]. It is for this reason that Cengage Learning has taken the pioneering step of appointing an academic as one of the advisors for the building of the *Punch* Historical Archive. For the first time, Cengage Learning has provided within this archive resources that not only focus on the product itself, but on the wider historical context of *Punch* as a publication and on how users may interact with their product [5]. Just as *Punch* was alert to social and cultural changes that impacted on its cartoons and weekly features, so too do academics need to acknowledge the constantly evolving power of the digital archive. Resources and seminar plans require constant review and amendment as archives are updated and developed, and as new resources emerge. Students form a vital part of this changing landscape. If we as researchers need to be both producers as well as consumers, then so too do

our students. For it is through empowerment that students are most able to be engaged:

Learning, knowledge, joint products and practices emerge from interaction, participation and reflection in a conversational exchange. As individuals add to, elaborate, comment on and question others' contributions, the visible stream of their questioning and others' responses to them become important contributors to the content and social definition of the space.

Haythornthwaite & Andrews, *E-Learning Theory and Practice* (2011): p. 92

The sample seminars included in this resource base, alongside the examples provided under the "Teaching and Learning" tab on the LJMU website, aim to demonstrate how interactive projects based on *Punch* can be built. It is the aim of these sample seminars and the LJMU website to not only provide notes from academics' experiences of teaching about the Victorian Periodical Press, but also to suggest how academics can use their research to actively engage students, rather than creating seminars purely informed by our own research interests. I want to engage with my students as future users of resources like the *Punch Historical Archive*, to tell me what they need from the resource and how their understanding of the product's production affects their consumption. Therefore, alongside my own notes, I will be building an evidence base of how my own students have responded to these tasks, making the transition from reader to active and engaged user.

## Conclusion

As this essay has begun to demonstrate, satire is a mode of cultural expression that has endured across

the centuries, providing a vibrant and vital source of cultural commentary through both the verbal and the visual. By making the variety of *Punch's* satire available through the *Punch Historical Archive*, students will be able to access a rich variety of material that has never been studied before. If the archive is used imaginatively, with teachers encouraging and facilitating students to create their own meta-narratives and methods for analysis, then the broader cultural value of *Punch* will finally become apparent for the first time.

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## FURTHER READING

Jonathan Grey et al (eds.) (2009) *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*

Richard Howells and Robert W. Mason (eds.) (2009) *Using Visual Evidence*

Caroline Haythornthwaite and Richard N. L. Andrews (2011) *E-Learning Theory and Practice*

Timothy S. Benson (2009) *The Cartoon Century: Modern Britain Through the Eyes of its Cartoonists*

## NOTES

[1] This is also referred to as 'Large Cut' or 'Big Cut' by a number of scholars and academics

[2] Neil Kinnock, interview with Ben Elton "Laughing at the '80s" (Channel 4, December 2011).

[3] See Brian Maidment, "Pencilings, Cuts and Cartoons: Punch and Early Victorian Comic Illustration" elsewhere on this site for further background to Punch's brand of visual humour.

[4] For example, see Seth Cayley "Creating the Punch Historical Archive"

[5] All of the resource essays are freely available on the Gale website

# CITATION

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