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Cultural and political influences on social media electoral cartoons: A comparative study of Nigeria and Finland

Political cartoons are increasingly central to digital election discourse, but they are often examined primarily as completed representational artefacts: what they depict, criticise, or symbolise. This paper extends such analysis by examining cartooning as an ecosocial and multimodal semiotic practice: a process of meaning-making shaped by political culture, media institutions, audience expectations, and platform infrastructures. Responding to ESFLC 2026's focus on ecosocial systems, the paper examines not only what electoral cartoons mean, but also how the sociopolitical environment and social media platforms shape what cartoonists decide to create, what can be shared online, what reaches audiences, and what is considered safe to draw.

The study compares social-media electoral cartoons produced around the 2023 elections in Nigeria and Finland. These cases were selected because they represent contrasting democratic and media ecologies. Nigeria offers a high-stakes and politically volatile electoral environment in which cartoonists navigate religious, ethnic, institutional, and partisan sensitivities. Finland, by contrast, represents a high-trust Nordic democracy where cartoonists work within stronger institutional protections, but still encounter legal scrutiny, polarised reception, and toxic online interaction. The comparison therefore illuminates how different ecosocial environments shape different "rules of drawability."

Theoretically, the paper brings Cultural Theory of Democracy into dialogue with SFL-informed multimodal social semiotics, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, and a Digital Multimodal Assemblage perspective. From an SFL perspective, electoral cartoons are treated as context-sensitive choices in meaning potential, shaped by field, tenor, and mode. The analysis considers how visual and verbal resources organise ideational meanings about electoral actors and events, interpersonal relations among cartoonists, targets and audiences, and textual/compositional meanings adapted to platformed circulation.

Methodologically, the study is producer-centred. Data comprise semi-structured Zoom interviews with four election cartoonists: three Nigerian and one Finnish. These interviews were supported by cartoon-elicitation using a purposive set of 80 election-period cartoons. The cartoons served two functions: first, as prompts through which cartoonists reflected on production decisions, perceived risks, audience reactions, and platform constraints; and second, as a contextual multimodal corpus for identifying recurring visual-verbal

patterns, metaphors, framings, and circulation-oriented design choices. Interview transcripts were thematically coded and interpreted alongside these multimodal patterns.

Findings show contrasting ecosocial rules of drawability. Nigerian cartoonists frame their work as interventionist accountability, or "speaking truth to power," within a higher-risk media ecology. This orientation favours confrontational framing, visual hyperbole, and emotionally charged metaphor, but also produces anticipatory self-censorship and strategic indirection around religious, ethnic, institutional, and partisan red lines. The Finnish cartoonist frames satire more as reflective civic sense-making, favouring irony, viewpoint shifting, and ambiguity, while reporting episodic legal scrutiny and strong reception pressure in polarised debates. Across both contexts, social-media visibility incentives shape not only distribution, but also topic selection, visual intensity, verbal anchoring, and interactional strategies. However, the dominant platform cost differs: Nigerian participants emphasise reduced reach after moderation or community-standards enforcement, while the Finnish participant highlights toxic comment cultures that encourage selective withdrawal from audience interaction.

The paper contributes a producer-centred, SFL-informed account of digital electoral satire, showing how political culture and platform governance co-produce multimodal meaning-making. It argues that analysing what electoral cartoons communicate is now inseparable from analysing the ecosocial conditions under which they are produced, circulated, moderated, and received.

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