

Case 7-D

Is a picture worth only the 1,000 words you agree with?

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The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* has been the dominant newspaper in that city for decades. However, like almost every newspaper, its circulation is declining, and in March 2018 the paper's owner, Block Communications, combined the *Post-Gazette*'s editorial pages with the editorial pages of another paper the corporation owns, the *Toledo Blade*. This combination of editorial functions among different newspapers has become more common in the industry, particularly for copy editing, which is now done through a "hub" system by corporations such as Gannett and GateHouse.

With the consolidation of the opinion function of the two papers, Keith Burris, editorial page editor of the *Blade*, was named editorial page editor of the combined product. The CEO of Block Communications is John Robinson Block, an early supporter of President Donald J. Trump. Both Block and Burris spent time on President Trump's plane after a 2016 campaign rally, according to CNN, which sourced the story through a photograph that was published in the *Blade*.

Rob Rogers had worked as an editorial cartoonist at the *Post Gazette* for 25 years and had drawn editorial cartoons in the Pittsburgh area for about 34 years. Rogers had won the Thomas Nast Award from the Overseas Press Club, the National Headliner Award, multiple regional state and national awards and had been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning. His work was often reprinted in national publications.

Rogers was fired from the *Post Gazette* on June 14, 2018. The paper disputed that Rogers had been fired, stating that it had offered him a contract that would have made him a freelancer delivering two cartoons to the paper per week.

Here is a link to some of the cartoons published in the *Post Gazette* as well as some of Rogers' more recent work. As of this writing, he has not elected to work full-time for any specific publication. https://twitter.com/rob_rogers?lang=en

According to Rogers, when Burris became his editor, he began to spike multiple editorial cartoons, many of which were critical of President Donald J. Trump. Burris has acknowledged that he is "more conservative" than past editorial page editors, and that even prior to President Trump's election in 2016, the newspaper owners had been trying to "right the ship" to reflect less liberal views. Rogers' own comments support some of this analysis; he acknowledged that he began to get significant "pushback" soon after Trump announced he was a candidate for the presidency. Burris also said that he asked Rogers to pen cartoons that were funnier. "He's just become too angry for his health or for his own good," John Block, told *Politico*. "He's obsessed with Trump."

Rogers responded to the change in his employment status—which he continued to characterize as a firing—in this way: "I fear that today's unjustified firing of a dissenting voice on the editorial pages will only serve to diminish an opinion section that was once one of America's best. I love what I do and will continue to find ways to do it and get it out there. The world needs satire now more than ever."

Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto, who had been regularly skewered in Rogers' work, also weighed in on the news. "The move today by the leadership of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette to fire Rob Rogers after he drew a series of cartoons critical of President Trump is disappointing, and sends the wrong message about press freedoms in a time when they are under siege."

On November 4, veteran conservative cartoonist Steve Kelley reported for his first day at work at the *Post Gazette*. Kelly also had a distinguished history in the field and had been the subject of economic downsizing, most recently at the New Orleans Times Picayune. Here are some examples of his work:

<https://www.creators.com/features/steve-kelley>.

"The *Post-Gazette*'s continued commitment to providing the work of a staff political cartoonist stands in distinct contrast to the impulse of most to reduce costs by simply running syndicated work," Kelley told *The Washington Post*'s Comic Riffs.

Micro Issues

1. How is an editorial cartoon like and unlike other newspaper copy—say news or feature stories. An editorial column. Should cartoons be edited in the same way?
2. What is the role of an editorial cartoon in the newspaper? To whom is the cartoonist accountable?
3. Are editorial cartoons required to be funny?

Mid-range Issues

1. What Greek virtues do you believe Rogers' work exemplifies? How would you answer the same question about Steve Kelley's work?
2. Evaluate the statements by Burris and Block with regard to Rogers' work. Are these two men responding to stakeholder or stockholder theory?
3. Compare the work of editorial cartoonists such as Rogers and Kelly to the "opinion panels" on cable news. What professional norms do you believe this opinion-focused content sustains or violates?

Macro Issues

1. Should ownership determine content? In the US? In countries that license journalists and/or publishers?
2. Cartoons, because they are based in visual imagery, have been the focus of profound debates. Compare the decision at the *Post Gazette* with the decisions made by French publication Charlie Hebdo. Is satire about a president somehow different than satire about a religion? Base your response in ethical theory.
3. Reread Chapter 9 on social justice. Does thinking about social justice change your answers to macro questions 1 and 2?