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THE INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE OF AUTHORITIES AND FIREFIGHTING SERVICES IN POLITICAL CARTOONS: 2025 LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES

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Abstract: In times of crisis, public perception of institutional effectiveness is often crystallized and contested in the media. Political cartoons, as potent polycode texts, offer a unique lens through which to analyze these social processes. The article examines the formation of a metaphorical image of a professional in emergency situations and natural disasters, as reflected in political cartoons featuring the Los Angeles wildfires in January 2025. The study utilises a comprehensive dataset of 140 English-language political cartoons sourced from various news outlets and social media platforms. Adopting a multimodal critical discourse analysis framework, the authors systematically examine the correlation between verbal components (captions, labels) and non-verbal elements (iconic imagery, symbolism) to decode the cartoons' pragmatic meanings. The results reveal a stark binary opposition in the portrayal of the two professional groups. Politicians are predominantly depicted negatively through recurring metaphors of arsonist, entertainer, film antagonist, and fanning the flame, suggesting incompetence, malicious intent, and a profound disconnect from the tragedy. On the other hand, firefighters are consistently glorified as heroic figures through metaphors of divinity (angels) and action hero, embodying self-sacrifice and competence. However, they are also portrayed as marginalized victims of institutional failure, facing equipment shortages and a lack of support. The cinematographic metaphor was notably prevalent in the dataset, a finding attributed to the event's Hollywood location and its dramatic media coverage. It is concluded that political cartoons serve as a crucial vehicle for social critique,

translating complex institutional failures into accessible and powerful narratives that significantly influence public opinion. The findings provide a framework for further comparative studies of political cartoons surrounding emergencies and the semiotics of crisis communication in other socio-political spheres.

Keywords: political cartoon, professional discourse, polycode text, visual metaphor, political metaphor, political linguistics, multimodality, crisis communication.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the process of how individuals and groups are socially perceived, various images, stereotypes, and ideals are formed in people's consciousness. These mental constructs result from subjective perceptions that often tend to be simplified, schematic, and even distorted. They encompass both descriptive characteristics and evaluative judgments, reflecting the peculiarities of everyday thinking. Such representations cover a wide range of social objects, from specific individuals to entire groups associated with different social categories and communities. The aim of the research is to present an analysis of said constructs, identify characteristic features of a professional personality representation in the context of emergencies, and explore the most common vectors of its public perception in political cartoons. A critical test of this professional image is the ability to confront natural disasters and their destructive consequences, which reveals and demonstrates the true effectiveness of the authorities or those in charge and their capability of making balanced decisions and taking responsibility for them in the eyes of the public. In this regard, the situation with the wildfires that took place in January 2025 in California is relevant as they wreaked havoc on a huge part of Los Angeles and required great efforts to be stopped. The fires, apart from being disastrous (27 people died, more than 100 thousand residents were evacuated; due to powerful winds, the fire spread instantly; in total, the flames destroyed more than 12 thousand real estate objects), revealed many problems that had to be immediately solved by means of effective work and coordination of both the firefighters and the authorities. Their actions underwent intense scrutiny due to the fact that citizens, as well as people from all over the world, observed the situation closely and expressed their opinions explicitly.

It seems possible to evaluate this work through the cognitive analysis of public perception, that may be reflected in various artistic forms, with metaphorical mapping, such as political cartoons. These are widely known for being a comprehensive means of conveying complicated ideas in easy-to-decode ways.

The present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the metaphorical representation of the professional images of authorities and firefighters in political cartoons that address the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires?
2. How do the identified metaphors reflect public perception of institutional crisis narratives in times of emergency?

The article is structured in the following way: the next section presents the theoretical background, which lays the foundation of the study with the requisite literature review. Section three details the methods, data, their selection criteria, and analysis procedure. Section four is where the results of the study can be found. Section five is devoted to the discussion of findings, whereas the final section presents the conclusion and implications of the study.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Among numerous studies of discourse typologies, the one suggested by Karasik (2024, p. 24) is applicable to most modern approaches to linguistic corpus analyses. It implies the importance of status orientation in terms of discourse type definition. Thus, it may be aimed at a person or a social status and hence be called “personal” and “status-oriented”. In the first case, communicative situations take place when participants share or exchange their worldviews and ideas, while in the second, they are divided by the uneven position of social superiority or inferiority. Additionally, status-oriented discourse highlights an individual’s affiliation with a certain social group, organization, or institution, which necessitates adhering to a specific behavioural protocol that includes official speech norms and formulations. This type of practice falls under the term “institutional” and has an opposite variation “noninstitutional” implying the absence of the aforementioned official speech protocols. The researcher notes that “along with the functional-thematic criterion for the classification of institutional communication, other criteria are also distinguished, in particular administrative and professional. In this regard, professional discourse is a detailed description of the subjects of institutional communication and the norms of their behaviour” (Op. cit., 2024, pp. 111, 116). Professional discourse contrasts sharply with non-professional discourse due to the distinct qualities of their respective subjects. Professional discussions involve individuals who possess specialized training in particular fields, whereas non-professional exchanges include general participants lacking such expertise. Some subjects are exclusively discussed among experts, while others attract amateur enthusiasts, such as quantum physics or obscure language grammars versus politics. One notable trait of contemporary society is the extensive prevalence of simplified discourses, along with the increasingly indistinct line separating their informative and entertainment-oriented forms.

In stylistic terms, professional discourse can be official, semi-official, and unofficial (Khustenko & Mishankina, 2021, p. 90). Special attention is paid to terms and professionalism as emblems of these types of communication (Golovanova, 2021, p. 40).

Considering the modelling of professional discourse in relation to communicative practice Kochemasova & Voronina (2018, p. 147) note that “professional discourse can be defined as any semiotic forms (spoken, written or visual) composed and constituting social and domain contexts and used by professionals with special training to achieve transactional interaction as well as socialization and normative functions”. Beilinson (2009, p. 145) argues that “professional speech in communicative terms represents a special perspective on discourse differing both from the models of institutional discourse (pedagogical, medical, constitutional, etc.) and from the models of business discourse”. The researcher classifies the following parameters among the constitutive features of professional discourse: 1) professionally meaningful subject area; 2) tools; 3) professional assessments of the quality of work; 4) professionally marked strategies of communicative behaviour; 5) professional self-presentation.

Speaking about the ways of creating the image of a professional, Ivanova S.V. (2024, p. 36) explores the strategies for constructing this image or its transformation via certain linguo-semiotic tools. The researcher identifies five of them at different levels of message formation – at the communicative level, the strategy of informing is most common, at the pragmatic level – the one of personalization, at the metapragmatic level – that of self-presentation or self-promotion, at the level of implementation of the text message – narrativization and at the instrumental level – multimodality.

Multimodality is understood as a description of general laws and rules of interaction in the communicative act of verbal and non-verbal signs, the combination of various codes for presenting information. Qingwen (2025, p. 1) underscores the importance of multimodal metaphor research “which has become more and more prominent in the academic field, and the expansion of the scope of genres studied has not only enriched the application of metaphor theory, but also provided new perspectives and tools for cultural communication and international image building”. According to Wang (2022, p. 543), “multimodal metaphors have found extensive use in diverse areas of media studies like “advertisements, comics, gestures, and films, thus greatly contributing to the advancement of multimodal metaphor theory. Awier (2021, p. 7) expands on this by stating that this form of metaphor merges aspects from different modalities – such as visual, textual, and auditory – to create a powerful and appealing mode of communication. Butulussi (2025, p. 89) highlights how multimodal metaphors engage spectators on deep levels, stimulating their cognitive, emotional, multi-sensory, and somatic responses to ideological issues. An analysis of the literature that was conducted by Medina (2022) indicates a tendency in international linguistics to describe mixed texts such as political cartoons through the term “multimodal”; in Russian studies, philologists opt for the terms “creolized” and “polycode”. This research relies on the usage of the term “polycode texts,” which is understood as a combination in a single graphic space of semiotically heterogeneous components: verbal and non-verbal.

Sorokina (2017, p. 169) notes that the most studied visually observable non-verbal means of self-presentation of the speaker’s personality are kinesthetic (external manifestations of feelings and emotions through gestures and facial expressions) and proxemic (location of people in personal space). To describe the non-verbal component, one may consider kinesic means and methods of their implementation (head movements, facial expressions, mimemes, manual gestures). It should be noted that practically all of them were taken into account when conducting an analysis of political cartoons due to the tendency to pay special attention and exaggerate the mimics of the subjects depicted by the artists. As noticed by Shaoyang (2018, p. 140), “caricatures are capable of adding any type of discourse an expressive colour. Political caricatures perform a reflexive function as a response to the statements and actions of the depicted subjects”. Chu (2022, p. 1) regards cartoons incorporating both verbal and non-verbal discourse as persuasive visual summaries that effectively illustrate contemporary societal concerns in an accessible manner for the broader audience. Makinde (2024, p. 302) points out that “outwardly, they explain linguistic ideas that characteristically and philosophically defend a critical analogical vision, introducing the cartoonist’s philosophical notions and embedded themes and variations in the cultural sectors”. They are often characterised by a humorous tone of presentation of the material and special humorous patterns frequently refer to national and cultural specificities. In this regard, Hai & Vien (2024, p. 962) note that “metaphors can bridge cultural differences and improve message resonance as culturally adapted multimodal metaphors foster deeper connections and clearer communication”.

In the political discourse, a caricature might be regarded as a source of information concerning the relationship between people, certain political events, and power. Liepa, Šaudiņa & Oļehnovičs (2021, p. 391) state that “visual and multimodal metaphors are highly context-dependent, necessitating their identification and interpretation within the specific domain of their context, especially in political cartoons where this context is primarily the socio-political arena”. Among numerous acute social, economic, and political conundrums, the target and the object of ridicule of such polycode texts are politicians and their incompetence, the inability to solve problems in emergency situations, as well as the ubiquitous abuse of power.

Guerrieri, Ervas & Gola (2023, p. 2) point out that “visual metaphors in communication, which involve quick comprehension, often activate the observer’s mental image. The triggering of mental imagery is necessary to understand those visual metaphors in which one of the two domains is not visible”. Thus, the perception of any caricature by an addressee requires from the latter the presence of a particular background that might also be nationally and culturally specific. The cogitation of the nature of a political cartoon is usually impossible without referring to the phenomenon of precedent or precedent phenomena. Ryzhkova & Kokkonen (2023, p. 340) note that “precedent in the creolized text of the caricature is realized both at the iconic level (through the visual metaphor) and at the verbal level (through the captions to the illustrations). This phenomenon, its types and methods of implementation are given special attention in political linguistics”. Nakhimova (2018, p. 44) identifies the following types of precedent phenomena in the context of multimodality: lexemes, statements, phraseological units, texts, non-verbal phenomena (musical, pictorial works, etc.), situations, names, events, actions, calendar dates, gestures, signs). According to the researcher, this list is not final and will be supplemented and detailed as the theory of precedent is further expounded.

The typology of cartoons includes two main genres: political cartoons, which are also called editorial cartoons, and comic cartoons, which are interpreted as jokes presented in a graphic form. As a rule, the formal features of the two types of cartoons coincide: the obligatory and dominant element is the image, which is often (but not always) accompanied by text containing signs of natural language. Unlike comic cartoons, characterised by the ability to cause laughter, political cartoons tend to drive home a more serious social message, which predetermines their satirical nature. This is due to their dual nature: on the one hand, these cartoons are part of political communication; on the other hand, they lie in the plane of humorous discourse. Political cartoons are integrated into the media text. They serve as a visual embodiment of either the individual vision of the cartoonist or the editorial position on current socially significant issues. Pavlina (2022, p. 164) notes that “the plot of a political cartoon is based on the news, so these graphic representations of reality are limited to a certain time frame and can be considered as a mirror of their time”.

In his work “Identifying and Interpreting Visual Metaphors in Political Cartoons” Forceville (2024, p. 258) states that interpreting a metaphor involves determining which characteristic(s) should be transferred from the source domain to the target domain: “In political cartoons, a topical political event generally serves as the target domain, paired with a source domain that vividly elicits the traits, attitudes, and emotions that encapsulate the cartoonist’s viewpoint on the subject matter”. Given that political cartoons aim to provide critical commentary – ideally witty – on current affairs, the characteristics transferred from the source often carry negative connotations. The determination of what constitutes “negative”, however, might range from being universally recognised to culturally specific within the context where the cartoon appears. Heinemann (2024,

p. 27) accentuates that “the essential element here is an implicit, sometimes extremely critical commentary with reference to the frame provided by the linguistic and situational context, which primarily consists of emphasising negative or shameful facts”.

Pedrazzini & Royaards (2022, p. 3) consider that “controversies are closely linked to offensiveness. Cartoons can be considered offensive when they transgress social and moral boundaries”. These implicit boundaries interact with “humor regimes”, which define who has the right to laugh at or mock another person regarding certain issues. From a pragmatic-enunciative standpoint, those involved in communication play a significant role in both potential and perceived offences: who is laughing at or ridiculing whom, and whether this criticism is directed toward others or themselves. Satire commonly targets those in power and becomes less acceptable when aimed at vulnerable individuals or minority groups. When dealing with tragedies, people’s ability to appreciate humour grows with increasing physical and temporal distance. The offence will arise more easily when a humorous message is considered to be uttered too close to the tragedy.

In this regard, it should be noted that the analysis of political cartoons depicting the natural disaster under consideration and the actions of authorities revealed diverse portrayals of the professional images of those in charge. These depictions, for the most part, focus on the politicians and firefighters as addressees of metaphorical expansion. The representation of their professional attributes and the emphasis placed on these characteristics in political cartoons enable us to assess their expertise and draw a link between the organizations they embody (institutional discourse) and the outcomes they are expected to achieve (professional discourse). A certain tone of offence and humour may contribute to palliating the social temper.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research material encompasses a broad sample of 140 English-language political cartoons devoted to the wildfire disaster in Los Angeles that occurred from January 07 to 31, 2025. The relevance of this research is highlighted not only by the recency of the event but also by the abundance of cartoons rich in various visual metaphors.

The dataset was compiled by means of continuous sampling, which means that any English-language cartoon on the event in question was taken into account, regardless of whether it was published by traditional news outlets or posted on social media websites, forums, and platforms for editorial cartoons. Thus, the first criterion for inclusion of the cartoon into the dataset was whether or not it was created in response to the current wildfire crisis. The earliest detected item of the sample dates back to January 08, 2025, and the latest – January 24, 2025. Cartoons were retrieved from open-access sources such as *Cagle*, *Cartoon Movement*, *CartoonStock*, *Creators*, *Democratic Underground*, *GoComics*, *Political Cartoons*, etc.; from newspapers and magazines such as *Independent Record*, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, *National Review*, *Politico*, *New York Daily News*, *Rapid City Journal*, *The Brazosport Facts*, *The Daily Herald*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Week*, *U.S. News & World Report*, etc.; as well as from social media pages and websites of individual cartoonists. The same work, even if found on several platforms (which was often the case), was included in the dataset only once.

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the results, a range of methodological instruments within the cognitive-discursive framework was employed. Specifically, comparative analysis, content analysis, and statistical methods were used. The first one facilitated the identification of distinctive attributes associated with professional activities during the current crisis through contrasting diverse facets of occupational practices, perceptual tendencies, and individual

behaviours across participants. Content analysis uncovered predominant themes, concepts, symbolic representations, and behavioural paradigms embedded within specific forms of professional discourse. Statistical methods helped validate observed trends in societal perspectives on professionals and evaluate the prevalence of those trends.

Searches were systematically conducted throughout January 2025 as the events unfolded, to mid-February, although the bigger part of the pool was released around the first week of the incident: 79.3% (111 items) from January 8 to 15; 20.7% (29 items) from January 16 to 24. Various combinations of the following keywords were used for searches: “authorities”, “California”, “caricature”, “cartoon”, “fire”, “firefighter”, “firefighting services”, “LA”, “Los Angeles”, “political”, “politician”, “wildfire”, “2025”.

The second criterion for the selection of cartoons was the presence of polycode text, i.e., the presence of a linguistic component represented by at least several lexemes. The methodological foundation of the political cartoon study lies in the plane of multimodal critical discourse analysis. Its application allows a researcher to reveal how the meaning of the text is created through the interaction of various semiotic means, the most prominent of which are verbal and pictorial (iconic) codes.

The analysis of caricatures was carried out in the following sequence: firstly, it was necessary to define the relevance of the polycode text to the event in question. Afterwards, both verbal and nonverbal components were considered in isolation to grasp their isolated pragmatic meanings. Here, it was obligatory to refer to the background references and allusions, as they were crucial to the compound and correct decoding of the initial idea and message of the artist. The proper understanding of the correlation between the components contributed to the synthesis of the results, yielding the final pragmatic meaning of political cartoons. A similar multi-step approach proved to be effective when working with the metaphorical image of politicians (Dymova et al., 2024).

The authors analysed the units expressing paralinguistic features of the characters depicted in political cartoons and identified the expressive nominations on a lexical level. The empirical material was studied by means of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

The coding procedure was qualitative and primarily inductive, which means metaphor categories were not predefined at the start of the analysis. To ensure the validity of interpretation, each cartoon was examined independently by the co-authors and then cross-checked in joint discussions. Hence, interrater agreement was achieved to minimise individual bias. As the analysis progressed, recurring patterns and metaphor categories were established based on their frequency and pragmatic prominence within the discourse. Additionally, the interpretation of lexical elements was supported by reference to English dictionaries and lexicographic data, enhancing the accuracy of metaphor identification and semantic analysis.

It should be noted that the study has some limitations. It does not account for potentially relevant content available behind paywalls, as well as material in languages other than English. Focusing on a specific event may also restrict the applicability of the findings to this particular crisis.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

The research was conducted in the following way. We first selected a total of 140 political cartoons for the relevant period of the fires. It is worth noting that a considerable number of cartoons from the previous fires were reused by a variety of online platforms reporting the event, which were not included in our analysis. Only new examples (created for the current wildfire case) were analysed. We then proceeded to group them according to the most prominent metaphorical

images. Two major groups emerged, representing the two institutions responsible for handling the disaster: one portraying the authorities, and the other the firefighting services. Following that, the most frequently used metaphorical images were identified. Thus, the findings, accompanied by our commentary, are presented below.

4.1. Representation of authorities

As was mentioned above, the first group depicted the elected officials in charge. That said, we have observed that President-elect Donald Trump (at the moment of the publication of the cartoons) was featured far more frequently than the then-President Joe Biden. This may be in part accounted for by netizens interpreting the coincidence of the wildfire and re-election as an ominous sign, as well as by dissatisfaction with his vehement denial of the existence of any environmental issues and fossil fuel policies. Another possible reason why he was such a prominent figure in the cartoons is that he implemented a number of environmental policies which prioritised fossil fuel production (Jacobo, 2025) and were anti-climate change (Walling, 2025), which is claimed to be the reason for the wildfire crisis in question. What is more, he withdrew the US from the Paris Climate Agreement, whose aim is to fight climate change, on the day of his inauguration (Bearak, 2025). Last but not least, he made a number of dismissive statements to the press about the wildfires (Milman, 2025), claiming that they were not to blame for the disaster, denying the problem (Nilsen, 2025). Apart from the leaders of the country, there are some other politicians (e.g., Gavin Newsom, Karen Bass) as well as a more abstract image of the powers that be. Regardless, for all of them, the connotation is strictly negative. The statistical data on the number of cartoons in each category can be seen in the table below (Table 1), with the total number amounting to 60.

Table 1. Authorities' representation in cartoons

4.1.1. Film industry	11
4.1.1.a. Film antagonist	5
4.1.1.b. Film award honoree	3
4.1.1.c. Entertainer	3
4.1.2. Arsonist	18
4.1.2.a. Kindling tools	3
4.1.2.b. Fuel containers	5
4.1.2.c. Gas pump nozzles	4
4.1.2.d. Fanning the flames	6
4.1.3. Fire	21
4.1.3.a. Danger	11
4.1.3.b. Denial	10
4.1.4. Battlefield	8
Miscellaneous	2
Total	60

A more detailed breakdown and analysis can be seen in the subsections below.

4.1.1. Film industry

The cinematographic metaphor, in this research, a metaphor based on imagery from the film industry, was one of the most frequently employed (see Table 1), with officials occupying different roles. The fact that Hollywood, a district of Los Angeles, is a place in which most films are produced may well be why this one was so omnipresent.

4.1.1.a. *Film antagonist*

Allusions to various movies wherein the government or particular elected officials are the villains of the story are quite widespread. In this respect, referencing famous films is fruitful for attributing certain characteristics to politicians through familiar images. The composition of such caricatures often follows the format of film posters, that is, inscriptions imitate the placement of film titles, or character postures replicate iconic film scenes.

Thus, in Figure 1, one can see Washington, D.C. being engulfed in flames, much like the set of a disaster movie, with the red colour being indicative of the fires. As is typical for the genre, there is a huge monster in the middle, which evokes the image of King Kong. Taken together, this could be a sharp critique of the government's tendency to neglect disasters, disregard major issues like climate change, and the lack of any meaningful actions to actually tackle the problem. The caption 'Disaster movie' reinforces the metaphorical proximity not only between the ongoing wildfire crisis and a scene from a disaster film but also between Donald Trump and a gigantic monster, causing this chaos.

Similarly, Figure 2 shows a reimagined *La La Land*, obviously chosen for the homographic pun referring the viewer not to the note [la:] but the abbreviation [el'ei]. Instead of a romantic image, there is Donald Trump dancing with the Statue of Liberty, holding up a sign 'Drill, Baby, Drill!' (a playful allusion to the pop-culture phrase 'Dance, Baby, Dance'). On the one hand, this is a clear indication that the policies enacted by the president-elect during his term have led to the current crisis. On the other hand, both images highlight the hypocrisy of those in power, as while they invoke liberty as their *modus operandi*, it is actually corporate greed that drives them. Interestingly, although the film's main male character is not originally an antagonist, the canonical scene is redefined by the cartoonist, and so is the character played by Donald Trump. In this version, he is assigned various villainous traits, e.g., the forced smile and the dropped torch of the Statue of Liberty hint that she has been coerced into dancing amidst the inferno. What is more, the blaze itself might have been initiated by this very same fallen torch.



Fig. 1 (Kimimo, 2025)



Fig. 2 (Morland, 2025)

4.1.1.b. *Film award honoree*

The next group of cartoons has to do with the awards and red carpet events. As such, Figure 3 employs a clever play on words, as instead of 'Walk of Fame,' we can see 'Walk of Flames' with Donald Trump again coming under fire for his policies. The backdrop of a city in flames is an indication of the legacy his presidency left with regard to the current environmental crisis. Figure 4 satirises the decision of Meta, owner of Facebook, to fact-check the aforementioned president. The

cartoon puts Mark Zuckerberg (the CEO of Meta) in the subservient role as he is rolling out the red carpet for the “star” with the fires raging in the background. Obviously, this elevates Donald Trump to a privileged position in relation to all other users.

Notably, the cartoons of this group do not feature images of politicians themselves, but rather their names. While it is standard practice to embed a celebrity’s name in a flagstone, this is far from true when it comes to red carpets. As a result, although being an honoree is meant to be prestigious, this concept is once again redefined by the caricaturists. In Figure 4, the placement of the name and the metaphorical opposition of up and down can symbolise a diminished status, loss of respect, whereas, traditionally, a red carpet signifies honour and distinction. Similarly, in Figure 3, the central emblem of the star contains the television icon, which not only implies that the president-elect received it for his contribution to the television industry rather than his official duties, but it also resembles an angry emoji such as 😡, reflecting either the crowd’s attitude or, more likely, ridiculing Donald Trump’s facial expression.

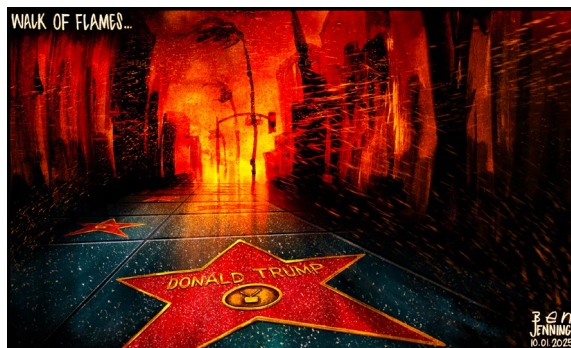


Fig. 3 (Jennings, 2025)

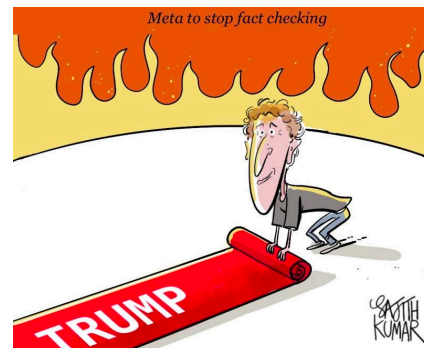


Fig. 4 (Kumar, 2025)

4.1.1.c. *Entertainer*

This group portrays people in power as entertainers rather than those in charge of dealing with serious issues, ignoring the real scope of the tragedy that is the California wildfires. Moreover, drawing closer these two differing images, the metaphor in question aims to highlight the authorities’ indifference towards performing both roles properly and towards the public’s concerns. Instead, they are represented to either indulge idly in buffoonery or use the disaster as a springboard for enhancing their public image.

In Figure 5, a clown symbolises the elected officials who take no real actions to rectify the situation, yet offer shallow ‘Policies’ (the inflated flower is evidently fake), not giving any real relief. It is notable that those affected by the tragedy are not fooled by this distraction as they respond by saying ‘Not now!’, indicating that such tactics and empty reassurances would not work. Being a classic symbol of the entertainment industry, the clown here evokes anxiety and fear, as he resembles one from a horror film (see the menacing grin, frown, and towering figure). Consequently, such politicians’ buffoonery is more likely to scare people than cheer them up as befits a clown.

Figure 6, yet again, features Donald Trump, whose audacious promises of ‘Show time’ are clearly juxtaposed with the pressing issue of the fires. His pose, just like the phrase in the bubble, is that of a showman rather than a decision-maker who would take the situation with the responsibility required under the circumstances. Similarly to the previous example, neither the direct nor the metaphorical roles are performed sincerely, as the politician here is not to amuse anyone but to make use of the fire and its impressiveness to his own advantage.



Fig. 5 (Stantis, 2025)



Fig. 6 (Amorim, 2025)

4.1.2. Arsonist

The cartoons, which are presented here, depict politicians as purposefully fuelling the fires, which can be interpreted as them either making matters worse due to inefficient policies or spreading misinformation. What is particularly striking about this metaphorical vector is the wide range of instruments used to start the fire. On the one hand, it reinforces the idea that the authorities did not merely allow the disaster to unfold through negligence but actively contributed to its occurrence. On the other hand, they reflect the spectrum of actions – from initiating the fire, that is to say, having ignored the early warning signs and taken no preventive measures, to stimulating it, in other words, aggravating the disaster.

4.1.2.a. Kindling tools

This group shows politicians using matches or torches to “start a fire”, which can be interpreted in Figure 7 as Donald Trump provoking a political controversy rather than making an effort to put out the wildfires raging in Los Angeles. He, and by extension the leadership of the country, is at cross purposes with the firefighter, a representative of the populace, who is actively trying to end the crisis. This can be an indication of the country, divided between people in power and the population, which is further supported by the allusion in the caption to *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens.

Figure 8 shows an alliance between the same president and some kind of extremist who appears to be Elon Musk as Hollywood burns in the background. The design of the armbands and the saluting gesture evoke imagery associated with Nazi Germany, although the labels contain the letter T – the Tesla logo on the left and Trump’s initial letter on the right. This could be a sign that the current radical policies of Donald Trump are both fueling the social unrest as well as literal fires. As an example of that, the cartoonist locates the signpost amidst the blaze as a reference to his statements about his desire to incorporate these territories into the US, which seems to be more of a “burning” issue to him than the periodic wildfires. It further suggests the criticism of the alleged collusion between the authorities and business elites, as well as their detachment from the public.



Fig. 7 (Weyant, 2025)

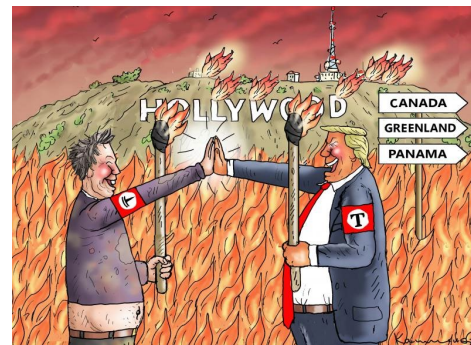


Fig. 8 (Kamensky, 2025, January 10)

4.1.2.b. Fuel containers

The second metaphor in the group is that of fuel containers, which are used to keep the fires going or make them worse. As such, Donald Trump and Elon Musk are using ‘Conspiracy theories’, ‘Revenge’, and ‘Lies’ to fuel the fires of controversy, as well as the real fires in California shown in Figure 9. This is a statement on the whole MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement being destructive. Alongside Figure 8, there is a recurring theme: the collaboration between the authorities and business tycoons. The smaller inscription on the plane – ‘CAPT. ELON. CO-PILOT DONNY’ (also note the use of the subtly condescending pet name form for the president) – suggests Donald Trump playing second fiddle in MAGA.

In Figure 10, Donald Trump is attempting to put out the fires with his ‘False incendiary remarks’, which is at odds with the intention to ‘assist’, implying that the politician’s involvement only makes matters worse, irrespective of his intentions. The remarks in question may refer to his denial of climate change or his downplaying its role in the current crisis.

On the whole, this vector is characterised by the combination of the container metaphor (abstract notions are measured and placed in a space with boundaries) and visualisation of the idiom “to pour gasoline on the fire”, meaning “to make a(n) ... bad situation worse” (“Pouring Gasoline on the Fire,” n.d.), (which the characters in the cartoons literally do only to illustrate the metaphorical proximity of this action and the wildfire aggravation by inappropriate political decisions). We also register the inclusion of the oppositional correlation of verbal and non-verbal elements (e.g., the contrast between the lexeme ‘assist’ and the canister brought to the fire), which intensifies irony.



Fig. 9 (Necessary, 2025)



Fig. 10 (Granlund, 2025)

4.1.2.c. *Gas pump nozzles*

The contribution of the government policy with regard to non-renewable resources, gas in particular, to the current wildfire crisis is vividly illustrated by the cartoons in this group. In Figure 11, the all-consuming fire in the background is clearly not helped by the California Forestry Policy, as the sign informs the viewer. The word ‘Gas’ is prominently displayed here as it is in Figure 12, where President Trump’s efforts to put out the fire with gasoline are juxtaposed with the firefighter’s efforts with his water hose (an idea previously reflected in Figure 7). These images shed light on the contradiction between the current policies and what is necessary for tackling the problem. Furthermore, they imply that those in power are culpable for exacerbating the situation, visually represented by them casually wielding hoses with gas.

This vector is yet another representation of the container metaphor described in 4.1.2.b. However, what is noteworthy is not only a new instrument for fueling the fire but also the volume of the container. Although this imagery involves the same metaphorical proximity of maladministration and “pouring gasoline”, nozzles of gas stations entail a bigger tank and no dearth of gasoline, that is to say, a more considerable amount of flawed governance and its aftereffect.



Fig. 11 (Payne, 2025)



Fig. 12 (Kamensky, 2025, January 14)

4.1.2.d. *Fanning the flames*

In this group, one can see someone physically blowing on the fire, making the situation worse. Contrary to all other vectors of 4.1., Donald Trump is non-existent here. Instead, we see some other politicians, who are either displayed solely in this vector or barely shown in any other category. This strongly suggests that this visual trope is not associated with the president-elect in the studied discourse, but the multitude of possible reasons makes it difficult to determine a definitive cause. The authors of this article assume that it might be accounted for by moderate passivity and lack of aggressiveness of the depicted action.

One culprit appears to be Joe Biden in Figure 13, where, while he is blowing, Los Angeles and America on the whole are on fire. It is noteworthy that America consists of the industries, which are to blame for the climate disaster. This implies that the situation is none the better for Biden’s actions (and the Democratic Party by extension) or lack thereof. In a similar vein, Figure 14 is entitled ‘The Devil Winds’, where we can see a huge and powerful figure blowing on the small and poor California. This man resembles Gavin Newsom, the governor of California, although there is no direct mention of that fact. Of particular interest is the wordplay in the caption since ‘devil’ here serves as an attribute both to the hurricane-force winds that literally contributed to the spread of fire in January 2025 and to the politician whose actions played a role in fire propagation.



Fig. 13 (Tosh, 2025, January 13)



Fig. 14 (Ramirez, 2025)

4.1.3. Fire

Despite the fact that the image of fire is part of every sampled cartoon, here it stands out as it bears metaphorical potential rather than a portrayal of the real wildfire in Los Angeles. Instead of being illustrated as the contextual setting of the cartoon, it becomes its central feature. In the caricature of this group, fire is incorporated into the image of a politician. Remarkably, this applied exclusively to Donald Trump.

4.1.3.a. Danger

Fire as an imminent threat is the key motif of this group. A notable aspect is that the ground for this metaphorical transference is the similarity between Donald Trump's hair colour and golden yellow fire. As a result, he is portrayed as having a blaze on top of his head, and, hence, the president is represented as the source of danger. However, he is no longer a contributor to the wildfire disaster, as described in 4.1.2, but is depicted as the disaster itself.

While he is giving various sorts of excuses for the fires in Figure 15 (e.g., misadministration by other politicians, lack of water), the reader sees that it is merely a fire of 'lies' as the inscription notes. Curiously, the caption 'Raging out of control' signifies the inclusion of the concept "danger" both by visual means (e.g., red colour) and by verbal ones (e.g., the definition of this idiom includes "destructive" ("Rage out of control," n.d.); the definition of the verb – "violent" ("Rage," n.d.). Likewise, he appears as the bringer of destruction in Figure 16, with the tagline 'I'm coming' menacing against the backdrop of the forest on fire, with the trees in agony burning down to the ground. Of note is the fact that this cartoon depicts Donald Trump with the face of the icon discussed in Figure 3. Their varying authorship indicates the somewhat established association between Donald Trump and the emoji 😡.

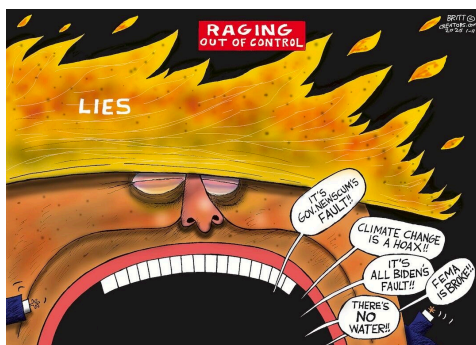


Fig. 15 (Britt, 2025)



Fig. 16 (Bahady, 2025)

4.1.3.b. Denial

This group exposes the continual denial of the problems of global warming by Trump supporters as well as him, personally. There is Donald Trump in a MAGA hat still asking ‘What global warming?’ while on fire with the cinderling LA sign fallen to the ground in Figure 17. This juxtaposition is ironic and underscores how willing delusional supporters are to deny the indisputable facts. Figure 18 conveys a similar message using the same analogy as in 4.1.3.a, where the president-elect’s hair is on fire. This part of his profile represents California and shows how disconnected he is from the reality of the situation, as is further reinforced by the tagline ‘It’s freezing in New York – Where the hell is global warming?’.

The works sampled for this group are explicitly characterised by the oppositional correlation of verbal and non-verbal elements. As a result, we continuously see Donald Trump on fire but, surprisingly, oblivious to the fact. The inclusion of speech bubbles or captions only intensifies the ironic effect on the viewer, as, although his body is already burning, he remains sceptical of the existence of global warming, one of the alleged sources of the wildfire under consideration.

Notably, the verbal elements of such caricature tend to be arranged in the form of a rhetorical question, which does not require an answer, and are either copied from or inspired by Donald Trump’s real statements. On the one hand, this question form suggests criticism of those who believe in global warming and a firm stance in refusing to side with them. On the other hand, the transference of the questions to a paradoxical context encourages the viewers to reassess them as absurd.



Fig. 17 (van Leeuwen, 2025)



Fig. 18 (Tosh, 2025, January 15)

4.1.4. Battlefield

The last metaphorical image identified is that of a battlefield. Specifically, the war metaphor in this section is applied to two vectors: either the wildfire aftermath or the process of extinguishing the wildfire is perceived as a battlefield with the forces of nature.

Figure 19 verbally conveys the former by lexical means – ‘Surrender Los Angeles’, which is the focal point of the image. Additionally, the war metaphor here is combined with another instance of the cinematographic metaphor, which was most prominent in 4.1.1, as both the witch’s image, the word “wicked” in the speech bubble, and its font are an allusion to the poster of the musical *Wicked* (premiered in 2003). This resulted in the appeal to a popular image of the Wicked Witch of the West, in this case, Climate Change (see the inscription on the witch’s dress), leaving the icon of the United States Forest Service (Smokey Bear) and Uncle Sam, the representation of the US government and the nation at large, in a rather powerless position after her attack. One more layer of drawing the metaphorical analogy between the witch and the wind is the pun in the speech bubble, in which “the Wicked Witch” is transformed into “the Wicked Winds”.

Figure 20, on the other hand, tackles another aspect of warfare, namely, wildfires being a form of Canada's 'invading the USA', which is clearly contrasted with the more traditional image of invasion presented in the top panel. In fact, the upper part of this cartoon is an allusion to Donald Trump's plan to make Canada the 51st state of the USA, which is represented as a real invasion with armed forces. Whereas this reflects the aggression and threat in the words and actions of the latter, as perceived by Canadians, the second strip depicts the Canadian version of invasion, which can be called one only metaphorically, as the reason behind the intrusion into the territory of their neighbour is the help with the wildfires. As a result of this contrast, we see that the second part of this cartoon is transformed into a battlefield, both showing the difference in understanding of what an invasion should be and reflecting the hardships of dealing with a natural disaster.



Fig. 19 (Zyglis, 2025)

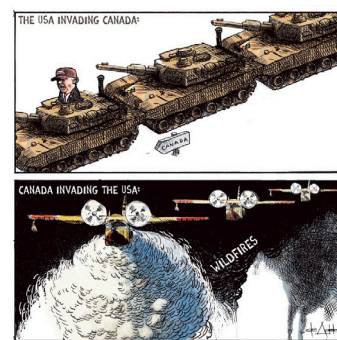


Fig. 20 (de Adder, 2025)

4.2. Representation of firefighting services

The second group encompassed the image of the firefighting services and their representatives. Albeit smaller (amounts to 24.2% of the sample, see Table 2) than its counterpart, it is nonetheless indicative of the way these servicemen are perceived by the public at large – the majority of images are positive in nature. Compared to the critical representation of authorities in terms of this incident, the caricature of firefighters aims to support them, disclose the obstacles of their work, and condemn the unfair attitude that the government adopted toward them.

Table 2. Firefighting services representation in cartoons
FIREFIGHTING SERVICES REPRESENTATION

4.2.1. Film industry	12
4.2.1.a. Action hero	6
4.2.1.b. Film award honoree	3
4.2.1.c. Film crew member	3
4.2.2. Divinity	7
4.2.2.a. Angel	3
4.2.2.b. Hell	4
4.2.3. Marginalisation	6
4.2.3.a. Downgrading social status	3
4.2.3.b. Ethnic stereotypes	3
4.2.4. Equipment failure	7
Miscellaneous	2
Total	34

4.2.1. Film industry

As was the case with the authorities, the most prominent sphere of metaphorical transference was the film industry (around 35% of the cartoons, see Table 2). This is hardly surprising, since the epicentre of the crisis, Los Angeles and Hollywood specifically, is also the place where most movies are made these days. However, only one image used for the cinematographic metaphor – a film award honoree – coincides in these groups. It is noteworthy that allusions to specific films are not characteristic of this category.

4.2.1.a. Action hero

Both images below show a firefighter shot at an angle typically seen in films. In Figure 21, the action literally takes place on a film set with the presumably director shouting ‘Now it’s real!’ and the epic-looking firefighter doing his best to put out the raging fire. Here, one can also see a pun: “on fire” (“On fire,” n.d.) colloquially means “playing, working, etc., extremely well”, which conveys a positive attitude towards the firefighter. Figure 22, similarly, depicts one firefighter coming face to face with the raging fire; curiously, the text of the image reads ‘Hollywood already has its best supporting actor’. While this can be seen as the firefighter not being the main star, he is still the best hope Hollywood has got.

The cinematographic metaphor *firefighter – action hero* is arranged complexly here. Firstly, the role of an actor, either visually (Figure 21) or verbally (Figure 22), is assigned to the firefighter. Secondly, the firefighter is placed at the forefront, heroically battling the flames, while others might be escaping or have already left in panic. Finally, although in reality, firefighters work in teams, in these samples, it is a lone figure defying the odds, which reinforces the trope of an action hero. This is used as a complimentary juxtaposition of the world of Hollywood, where actors merely play the roles of superheroes, and firefighters, whose aim is not to gain fame but to selflessly save lives.



Fig. 21 (Nath, 2025)



Fig. 22 (Darkow, 2025)

4.2.1.b. Film award honoree

The next group of images appeals to the Oscars and the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The former is awarded to the last firefighter standing in Figure 23, underscoring his significant achievement, as one can see just the remnants of the fires in the background. In this image, the Oscar, i.e., the reward, is quite tiny and insignificant compared to the immense achievement of saving people’s lives, which further shows the disconnect between the elites and those men and women on the ground saving lives, as has been identified in the group of images depicting the authorities. Figure 24 showcases another attempt to pay tribute to firefighters, this time by placing their handprints,

as opposed to the customary stars, on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Upon closer inspection, this is yet another hollow gesture since their names are not recognised by the citizens, unlike those of celebrities. This is a further testament that they are the unsung heroes whose contributions have not been appreciated nearly enough.

A somewhat similar image has been observed in 4.1.1.b. However, although the essence of awards is negatively redefined for authorities, as has been mentioned above, here the original positive interpretation of awarding is not only preserved but used as a tool for criticising society. Honorees are impersonalised to an extent that goes beyond wearing sunglasses and medical masks – their names are unfamiliar to the public. The pragmatic potential of this is to highlight the fact that real heroes remain in the shadows without any due recognition.



Fig. 23 (Maurer, 2025)

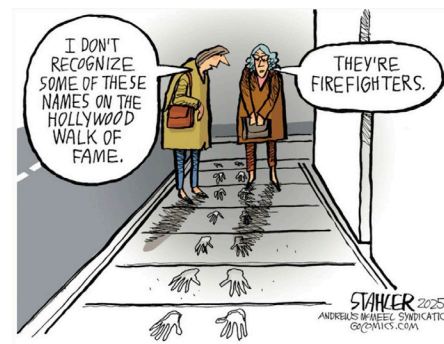


Fig. 24 (Stahler, 2025)

4.2.1.c. *Film crew member*

In opposition to the previous group, firefighters are members of the film crew in this one. In Figure 25, the fires are a literal movie shot by none other than Death itself, with the firefighter holding up the clapperboard with the name of the film 'Climate change' written on it. Thus, the message of doom and destruction is conveyed quite vividly due to the presence of the Grim Reaper, whilst the role of the firefighter is very scripted and predetermined. A similar yet less poignant message is communicated in Figure 26, where the members of the firefighting brigade are seen leaving the Hollywood Hills alongside the director, with a clear juxtaposition with the former holding a child and the latter – his equipment. The caption '...we shoulda made more movies on climate change' underscores Hollywood's failure to raise awareness of the issue, which led to its destruction.

Both examples ironically highlight that films on climate change as a means of raising awareness had been due a long time before the crisis took place. However, even now at the moment of crisis, there seems to exist indifference and frivolousness, hence the daily tone in speech bubbles from the public (e.g., see the elision 'shoulda' in Figure 26). Moreover, the firefighter in each one is allocated an assisting role and a task not connected to their professional duties, although the uniform is preserved. This makes this image particularly striking, especially with the blaze in the background, since it might prompt a question for the viewer as to why and under whose orders the firefighter is not carrying out their main professional duties when they are most needed.



Fig. 25 (Del Rosso, 2025)



Fig. 26 (Zapiro, 2025)

4.2.2. Divinity

This group underscores the angelic nature and sacrifice of the first responders amidst the hellish inferno of the fires. What it does is emphasise the heroism of firefighters who, like angels, save lives, even among the flames of hell. Such a binary opposition *heaven vs hell* sharpens the contrast even further: the worse the inferno, the more saintly firefighters appear. Pragmatically, this aims to heighten public empathy, encouraging viewers to perceive firefighters' work not only as a professional duty but as a spiritual feat.

4.2.2.a. Angel

In particular, this image is yet again dictated by the location of the wildfire – Los Angeles, which is also known as the City of Angels. This conceptual metaphor, however, mostly unfolds via the verbal level (e.g., captions, titles, inscriptions, etc. containing the lexeme 'angel') and less intensively through the visual one (e.g., wings, halo, flying, etc.). The lexeme 'angel', according to English dictionaries, is associated with such qualities as "good, helpful, or kind" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), "benevolent" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.), "spiritual" (Collins Dictionary, n.d.), which are attributed to firefighters in the cartoons.

The appeal to the angelic image is present in Figure 27, whose title is 'Angel of Rescue'. The title alongside the visual image of the city burning like a candle with the firefighter trying to extinguish it while it is still relatively intact is representative of a positive attitude towards the first responders. The odds of him dying, being depicted like a moth (a visualisation of the idiom "like a moth to a flame" that implies being "dangerously attracted" to something ("Like a moth to a flame," n.d.), are quite high, regardless, he persists. In a similar vein, Figure 28's caption 'City of Angels' puts the focus on those first responders, volunteers, and donors who, led by none other than a firefighter, bear the brunt of the fire's aftermath. Apart from that, it is noteworthy that in front of this marching group, we can still see the fires raging, while behind them, there is the white colour, often associated with angels and God, symbolising peace and an end to the disaster.



Fig. 27 (Takjoo, 2025)



Fig. 28 (Koterba, 2025)

4.2.2.b. Hell

To serve as the backdrop to the previous group, Figures 29 and 30 share the same motif of the flames of hell. The colour scheme of the former cartoon is that of deep crimson and black, which are extremely saturated, creating a sense of dread inherent in a hellish atmosphere. What is more, the Hollywood sign is intentionally distorted, aptly referred to as ‘*Hellywood*’, making this verbally explicit. Figure 30 shares the visual representation of fires (see the devil horns, demonic slit-like eyes), which, coupled with the title ‘the Los Angeles – Rage of the Inferno’, clearly appeals to the same core image of Hell on Earth. What this does is create a sense of chaos and destruction, making the role of those fighting the dark forces all the more divine.

As a rule, this group’s examples do not tend to incorporate the image of the firefighting services, but they definitely are to be analysed within 4.2 as they represent the hardships in the working conditions that firefighters have to endure. Despite the fact that the heaven-hell binary opposition is explicit in the institutional discourse, the images from 4.2.2.a and 4.2.2.b do not overlap. One reason for this could be that cartoonists feel the need to preserve the clarity of the semiotic elements, facilitate perception, and avoid interpretive ambiguity.

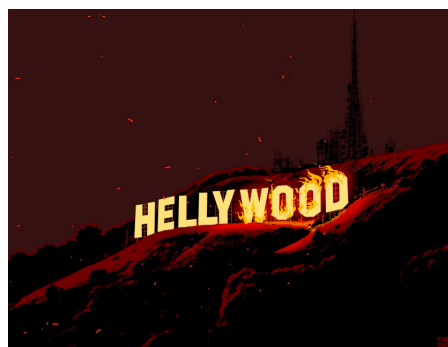


Fig. 29 (NEMØ, 2025)



Fig. 30 (Fatunla, 2025)

4.2.3. Marginalisation

Firefighters are likened to various marginalised groups, such as slaves, the homeless, or the immigrants, in this group of cartoons. Not only do they face exploitation and inequality much like those marginalised groups, but also, clearly, there is a lack of recognition of their heroic efforts by the media, similarly being dismissed. Overall, marginalisation is a visual tool used by cartoonists to reflect the current state of affairs, rather than condemn firefighters. The pragmatic purpose of this is along the lines of 4.2.2.a – to prompt viewers’ empathy, but it is achieved by an opposite means – demythologisation rather than divinisation.

4.2.3.a. Downgrading social status



Fig. 31 (Medina, 2025)



Fig. 32 (Stiglich, 2025)

As such, Figure 31 shows and verbally calls firefighters ‘modern slaves’, suggesting that their compensation for the work done is far from fair. What is more, the caption part ‘inmate firefighters’ sheds light on the historic tradition of using inmates as firefighters who receive little to no compensation for their life-threatening labour. The other group of a clearly lower social status in Figure 32 are the homeless begging for food, which is what the firefighters have to resort to with their primary resource – water. This is a clear indication that there is not enough support, leaving those in need no choice but to beg for what is clearly a basic necessity. Indeed, multiple news reports during the 2025 wildfires highlighted the severe shortage of water available to firefighting teams.

4.2.3.b. Ethnic stereotypes

In both Figures 33 and 34, Mexican firefighters are shown to be capable and adept at doing their job. Yet, in both instances, their origin is clearly emphasised, bringing to the fore several unsavoury stereotypes. Figure 33 subtly explores one according to which Hispanics, be that firefighters or some other professions, are good at building something. Looking at the industrious firefighters turn construction site workers and how well-suited they are for manual labour (rebuilding and re-roofing houses), the civilian in the picture thanks them for their help ‘with these wildfires’ which are, incidentally, nowhere to be seen. To reinforce the message, there is an obligatory radio / boombox which is often associated with construction sites where Latin American workers are the majority. Figure 34 is more explicit in its message. It shows a sharp contrast between how these firefighters are portrayed by the Trump administration, i.e., ‘they’re bringing drugs, [...] crime, they’re rapists’, and how these people are contributing to the current crisis, fighting actual fires.

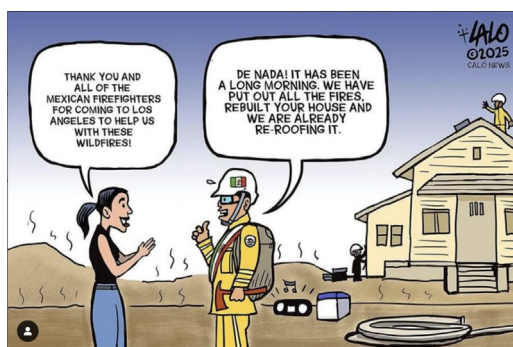


Fig. 33 (McLaughlin, 2025)



Fig. 34 (Jones, 2025)

4.2.4. Equipment failure

The last group shows equipment failure, namely the fire hose being either literally cut off or tangled, leaving firefighters without the main resource they need to do their jobs. Thus, Figure 35 communicates that it is ‘wokeism policies’ that are to blame for water being denied to the first responders who are actively trying to put out the fire. Their hands are tied. In Figure 36, it is ‘blame’, ‘lies’, ‘politics’, and ‘misinformation’ that cut the hose carrying water, leaving the firefighter to fend for themselves. This furthers the motif of the spread of lies and misinformation in the media/politics, which makes the job of extinguishing the fires virtually impossible.

Not only does this imagery resonate with the lack of water represented in 4.2.3.a., but it is also a contrast to the variety of arson methods to suit all tastes, as discussed in 4.1.2. Whereas authorities use a whole range of means to cause a fire, the only equipment that can help a firefighter does not function because it has been meddled with by various actors, governmental bodies among them.



Fig. 35 (Francisco, 2025)

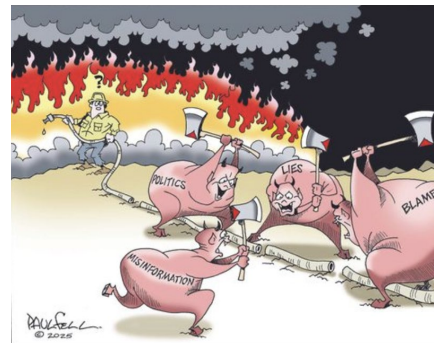


Fig. 36 (Fell, 2025)

5. DISCUSSION

The study of the metaphorical representation of politicians in various emergency situations or crises demonstrates certain recurring features: an appeal to political cartoons as they “remain the most representative in terms of public perception of political figures. It may be explained by the fact that the linguistic analysis of caricatures is based on the versatility of the methods of conveying the pragmatic meanings laid down by the authors, the synthesis of text levels and the establishment of correlation relationships to attract the attention of recipients and the intensity of the resulting images” (Dymova et al., 2024, p. 127). It is also worthy of notice that despite varying tactics used by cartoonists, every image/motif employs two dominant strategies: metaphorical transfer, altering cartoon elements to merge disparate realities, and allusions to unrelated events or prior statements.

The results of the linguistic analysis devoted to the wildfires in Los Angeles yielded two major findings. One, as mentioned before, is an unprecedented shift from the unspoken pattern of being inexplicit in opinions about disasters and tragedies through visual metaphors in political cartoons. This pattern is reflected in previous research, for instance, Pavlina (2022) in her study of cartoons featuring COVID-19 pandemic coverage found the majority of cartoons employed allusions, making criticism less explicit. Similarly, Pedrazzini & Royaards (2022, p. 363) note that meanings conveyed by satiric images are “generally implicit and figurative,” especially when they are produced in temporal proximity to a tragic event, which runs counter to the findings of the present study, as the cartoons were produced right in the middle of the California wildfire disaster.

The other finding is the emergence of a serious institutional crisis that indicates the disconnect between the elites and the people on the ground, concerned with solving the real and serious problems, as have been identified in the groups of images depicting the authorities and the firefighters. These two findings convey the idea that there is a certain public dissatisfaction that finds its way through art in the form of polycode texts. The general vector of the metaphorical perception of those participating in extinguishing the wildfires is polarised: one can see a rift dividing the authorities from the people and their expectations. Signs of this disconnect are present in other research. For instance, a pattern of “glorification” of some part of other groups of professionals (doctors, volunteers, etc.) as opposed to politicians in American caricatures in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pavlina, 2022, p. 189) or the support of scathing caricatures by the electorate in the comment section during the 2024 British parliamentary elections (Dymova et al., 2024).

In the current case, this lack of rapprochement is also illustrated in numbers: 60 political cartoons feature politicians as targets of the metaphorical transfer, 34 concentrate on the work of the firefighters, and 40 relate to miscellaneous domains. Such a shift towards the activities of those in power conveys the public’s interest in their effectiveness and competence, which leads to an abundance of critique.

The number of analysed political cartoons allowed us to single out a considerable number of dominant and frequent metaphorical frames functioning within the discourse of a professional.

The most widely presented frame is the *cinematographic metaphor* that implies acting out certain roles that the viewer should appreciate. It seems possible to say that the one aimed at the authorities is characterised by the reassessment of their perception (shifting from positive to negative, prestigious to contempt or mockery) and failure to live up to the image constructed by themselves in pursuit of popularity, fame, and approval. Besides, the cartoons depicting politicians are often more dramatic and spectacular, given the amount of self-importance and the attempts to control the recipient’s perception.

The cinematographic metaphor targeting firefighters is irrefutably positive and is marked with pragmatic meanings of heroism, self-sacrifice, and devotion. One cannot see any shift in perception in any of the cartoons: all rewards are righteously deserved and remain prestigious. Notably, the category “film crew”, opposed to the exaggerated pomp of politicians, presents the way they carry out their responsibilities – despite the real and manufactured challenges.

The frame “*Arsonist*” is also rather frequent and diverse in terms of means of setting fire. The most dominant target domain is the politician who is perceived as the culprit, major distributor, and at the same time beneficiary of the arson. The metaphors and allusions (for instance, “A Tale of Two Cities”) functioning within this frame are especially efficient in conveying the pragmatic meaning of a gap expanding between the elites and the people through the difference in actions of politicians and firefighters (see Figures 7 and 12). At the same time, it is opposed by the emergence of an idea of a well-organized collaboration between the authorities and business moguls (see Figures 8 and 9).

Among all the selected images depicting the wildfires, the metaphorical reference to fire itself is ubiquitous. However, it is noteworthy that the metaphor of *fire* with flames as the source domain is incorporated into the image of a politician, Donald Trump. In all other cases, its presence is less explicit.

Another prominent metaphor targeting the authorities is of a *military* origin. It implies the scale of the disaster and its aftermath and havoc, which in the eyes of the public look like a war theatre.

The positive perception of firefighters is continued in a more spiritual frame, focusing on a metaphor of “*Divinity*”. In this regard, the professionals are viewed as angels intervening in the situation with the urge to bring order, peace, and consolation. The dedication of Los Angeles firefighters is transformed into a spiritual soft power underscored by the working conditions reminiscent of hellfire. Furthermore, fire as an untamed element is depicted as a demon. Such a binary opposition contributes to captivating the recipients’ empathy and marvelling at demonstrated selflessness and heroism.

Nevertheless, recipients’ empathy is also achieved by semantically “humbling” images incorporating the *marginalisation of firefighters*. In this case, they are intentionally depicted either as homeless or enslaved to convey the idea of deprivation of basic tools to do their job and a lack of respectful attitude from the authorities necessary to be properly motivated. This vivid downgrading of the status is quite relevant to the real state of affairs: the reported situation with water deficit, lack of equipment and vehicles, the condescending, manipulative and dismissive attitude from politicians, all broadcast by the media, leads to real marginalisation. Unlike deification, it is done not by the artists but by real people in power. This aspect also comes with undermining firefighters’ heroism, intertwined with various ethnic stereotypes and diminishing their role.

Yet another contributing factor to a series of humbling political cartoons depicting firefighters is linked to their *faulty equipment*, conveyed by the images of tools or hoses ruined by politicians or the media. Thus, firefighters fall victim to certain political miscalculations that endanger public security. This situation indicates the low rate of trust towards governmental institutions and the presence of an “inner enemy”.

Finally, it should be noted that the interpretative and supportive correlation is dominant in most caricatures as it expounds the implied pragmatic meanings in comprehensible forms. The oppositional correlation of verbal and non-verbal elements is often deployed when politicians become target domains of visual metaphorical transfer, which implies an ironic contradiction between the words they say and the actions they undertake.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the research indicate that the following linguistic means are used to shape the professional image of the authorities and firefighting services in the context of Los Angeles wildfires: stylistic devices, intertextual references, structural elements, wordplay, and correlative relationships of verbal and nonverbal elements. Taking into account the stylistic function within the analysed sample of political cartoons, the most frequently used devices are hyperbole, litotes, personification, anthropomorphism, and artifact metaphors. These linguistic means enhance the potential impact on the recipient by altering the ordinary meaning of words and images through metaphorical use, irony, and exaggeration. Another major feature of the analysed cartoons is their reliance on integrating intertextual references that evoke previously prominent events or influential cultural works. In this regard, cartoonists employed the full range of precedent phenomena and allusions.

There is a clear binary opposition of the two parties of the wildfire crisis: those in power and firefighters. The former’s vector is clearly negative as politicians are shown to be incompetent and/or unwilling to deal with the disaster, while the latter are portrayed in an unequivocally positive light either as heroes or victims in the situation, being indicative of an institutional crisis.

Cinematographic metaphor is one of the most illustrative examples of the difference in perception of the two institutions in question. Whilst the authorities were depicted as *Film Antagonists*, undeserving of the awards in *Film award honoree*, and *Entertainers* amidst the unfolding disaster, the firefighting establishment was shown to be *Action Heroes* or real *Film award honorees*.

The presence of a crisis is readily apparent when looking at the other metaphoric images employed. For instance, members of the government feature in the frames *Arsonist* and *Fire*, clearly being blamed for or complicit in the disaster, as opposed to the firefighters who were glorified in the frames *Divinity* and sacrifices were unappreciated by the powers that be reflected in the image of *Marginalisation*.

In light of these findings, it could be said that the image of a professional in the context of political caricature serves as a critical component of the analysis of the state of society and authorities exerting a significant impact on the formation of public opinion. Political cartoons thus become indispensable for public dialogue, raising pressing issues of public administration in times of crisis. Their influence extends far beyond the aesthetic value that led to the development of art, becoming a critical element of social dynamics and citizen participation.

Further research of political cartoons is necessary to gauge the public perception of and attitude to those in power and the current events unfolding. It might also include the assessment of the diachronic evolution of institutional images in cartoons devoted to either other significant events or to recurring California wildfires (e.g., a new outbreak occurred in August of the same year as the one studied in this paper). Moreover, the January 2025 wildfires may be examined from a different angle: content available behind paywalls, material in languages other than English, and other media genres.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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