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**Introduction: 'Public Information Comics'**

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Abstract

This symposium article brings together distinguished scholars from the field of criminology, graphic arts, creative industries and social policy, and English to reflect on a suite of 'educational' or 'public information' comics created by the Scottish Centre for Comics Studies (SCCS), based at the University of Dundee. There are now 20-plus titles available to the public for free download and distribution on a range of subject matters relating to healthcare, law and justice, science, forensic analysis, trauma and memory studies, as well as a diverse range of literary adaptations, creative responses to literary and cultural texts, and other subjects. Each of these works relies on a strong symbiotic relationship between their authors, experts, artists, editors, and other contributors to successfully convey every story at hand. Every comic is also meticulously reviewed for accuracy – both written and visual – at each stage of creation, leading up to publication. In this article, the contributors have focused on selected titles from our 'educational' comics series to generate incisive analyses that will be relevant to scholars working in a broad range of fields from law, psychology, the humanities and creative arts, to healthcare and the sciences, understood broadly. In order of appearance, the contributors are Paul Long, Christopher Pizzino, Angus Nurse, and Ian Horton.

Key words: education, impact, public information, science communication, graphic narrative, comics, Dundee

This symposium considers public information – or educational – comics created by the Scottish Centre for Comics Studies (SCCS), based at the University of Dundee.[1] Since 2016, the SCCS, has published more than 20 public information comics. The main aim of the project has been to work with external partners (charities, third sector partners, government, etc) to create comics as a mode of impactful public information communication on themes such as healthcare, education, human rights, science communication, and sustainability. The local, national and international partners typically provide funding for the comics we have produced. We develop the scripts, commission the artists and edit the comics. We have developed a creative co-design process to facilitate this work, and through the project have supported comics creators, providing employment and enhancing their creative skills and professional experiences.

The comics we have produced tackle misunderstood medical conditions, complex scientific issues, and other public-interest matters, resulting in increased knowledge and understanding across a range of audiences, stakeholders and practitioners, and frequently respond to pressing challenges in healthcare, law, and science, among other fields. The aim across each of these titles is to use the medium of comics to communicate important messages to the public, based on our underpinning research on the use of comics for educational purposes, while implementing the University's Public Engagement Strategy to enact transformational change for communities and individuals. We have led the development of an applied comics

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[1] The full range of our educational comics are available via this link:
https://scottishcomicstudies.com/public-information-and-educational-comics/. All comics are available for free for download and distribution.

co-design methodology, known as a comics 'Comics Jam' to work with a range of internal and external partners in collaboration with the comics creators based in Dundee Comics Creative Space (DCCS). As the authors explain,

> This process creates a feedback loop between research, practice and the various stakeholders, each of whom is empowered within the co-design methodology to contribute to the comic based on their expertise. This is driven by the operational logic of such projects, which bring together participants from diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise, to collaborate and co-design outputs at the interface between critical and creative investigation.[2]

One of the advantages of this methodology – which utilises some elements of a 'design sprint' – is that every partner's area of expertise is fed into the comics script and final output. To provide one example, in 2019, we worked with colleagues in the School of Nursing at Dundee, and final-year students completing a module on developing autonomy and independent practice in mental health nursing. Through intensive 'comics jam' sessions and groupwork, students prepared comics scripts addressing specific challenges in this field, in this instance choosing to focus on raising awareness about suicide prevention. Once finalised, scripts were then passed on to comics creators based at DCCS who then developed draft comics sketches, before handing them back to each group for review. One of the stories, 'Noticed', addressed the importance of face-to-face communication between therapists and patients admitted into mental health wards, highlighting the way in which observational notes may not necessarily capture the complexity of patient experiences. In an early draft, the

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[2] Herd et al, 'Comics Jam: Creating healthcare and science communication comics – A sprint co-design methodology'. *Studies in Comics* (2020) 11.1, 167-192.

patient was depicted holding a pill bottle, but this was changed on review as the group advised under supervision that patients would not be left alone with more than one tablet. This characterises the scrutiny that accompanies the feedback process, and the way in which our educational comics undergo multiple stages of review to ensure accuracy in both their written and visual content.

Comics are very well-suited to communicating complex information in ways that are easily comprehensible to the public. A systematic literature review commissioned by Education Scotland found that creativity and arts are important for educational and wellbeing outcomes. This research was then enhanced by Jindal-Snape and Murray via a systematic review on the impact of arts participation in children's learning.[3] Further, our public information comics initiatives were made possible by the development of a participatory iterative process for the creation of educational comics, based on a highly collaborative approach between researchers, members of the community, experts in relevant fields, and comics creators. Through this process we work with partners (such as Fibromyalgia Action UK, British Heart Foundation, NHS, Brittle Bone Society, Organ Donation Scotland, the Coeliac Disease Society, and many others), discussing the project through a series of meetings in advance of an intensive 'script jam', followed by a review of the resulting preparatory sketches and layouts), ensures that the information is presented in an effective and targeted way. We have built the infrastructure to support this production DCCS, Ink Pot Studio, and the UniVerse publishing imprint), which has in turn led to the development of a Creative Economies strategy in Humanities which has partnerships, impactful research, and public engagement at

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[3] Divya Jindal-Snape and others, 'Impact of arts participation on children's achievement: A systematic literature review' (2018) 29 *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 59.

its core. All our comics are made freely available as electronic and paper versions and remain easily accessible via the University of Dundee's Discovery Research Portal (Pure).

As Nabizadeh has written elsewhere, 'comics also tend to pasts and people that are frequently occluded from dominant public discourses' and are thus particularly valuable for communicating stories that remain unheard or which go 'against the grain'.[4] With regards to our public information comics, those directly affected by the conditions or themes that we have tackled have reported that they found new ways to discuss their health conditions with professionals and their families. Others have said that they gained a better understanding about these conditions. A good example is *Fibromyalgia and Us* (2017), a comic which focusses on the lived experience of people living with fibromyalgia, a chronic pain and fatigue condition, its impact on families and how they support, as well as sharing the views of a GP and physiotherapist.

<Insert Figure 1>

Figure 1: Cover of *Fibromyalgia and Us* (2017). Written by Divya Jindal-Snape et al. Cover artwork Aisling Larkin.

The lead story, 'Living and Working with Fibromyalgia', depicts Divya Jindal-Snape's insights into what living with fibromyalgia feels like. The page below provides a useful example of how the comics form utilises highly edited content to convey a breadth of storytelling in a condensed form.

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[4] Golnar Nabizadeh, *Representation and Memory in Graphic Novels* (Routledge 2019) 23.

<Insert Figure 2>


Figure 2: 'So what does it feel like?' Written by Divya Jindal-Snape. Artwork Aisling Larkin.


Readers noted that the image of acid being poured onto the character Divya's arm in the second break-out panel generates a visceral response as it allows them to imagine the pain of this experience, while the panel depicting her 'journey' through the week efficiently conveys the way that the condition crescendos over time, resulting in debilitating pain. The path in this panel, along with the worsening weather conditions support the reader's understanding that they are encountering a snapshot of the impact of the condition for Divya configured as a metaphorical and lived experience. In response to the comic, people directly affected by fibromyalgia and significant others have contacted us either by email or left comments on the websites such as *The Mighty* to highlight the impact of the comic due to the visuals and imagery. One reader wrote, 'it's so easy to doubt what you're experiencing, and that's the scariest part, let alone explaining it to anyone. These comics really do resonate with all invisible, misunderstood illnesses.' Another wrote, 'My mother suffers from fibromyalgia, but I learned more about the condition and its impact through this comic than my experience at home. It exposes real patient insights/thoughts – they're 'raw' and moving'. Project such as *Fibromyalgia and Us* have ongoing impacts; for example, on the recommendation of clinical directors, paper copies of *Fibromyalgia and Us* were made available in all 64 NHS Tayside surgeries and pain clinics. As a result of the popularity of the comic, the GP who had contributed to the comic received letters from people from around the UK for advice. The stories from *Fibromyalgia and Us* were also reprinted in *Fibromyalgia Magazine*, the only global fibromyalgia magazine, and the comic has downloaded more than 15,500 times since

its publication in 2017. The outstanding response also led to the translation of the comic into Spanish in 2020.

As another example, our Scottish Universities Insight Institute-funded project, *When People Die: Stories from Young People*, worked with charities, 12 young people, and 6 local and UK-based artists to create an educational comic about young people coping with the death of a loved one. Some of the feedback we received on this comic included insights from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, Bruce Adamson, who stated that the comic 'puts the experiences of children and young people at the heart of a powerful tool that children, their families and professionals can use to help children understand death and bereavement.' Janet O'Connor from Children's Hospices Across Scotland – one of the charities involved in the project – wrote, 'We have displayed the comics in the hospice and they were flying off the shelf. Parents were taking them to begin the conversations with their children in preparation for end of life. My colleagues within the community and in the Glasgow children's hospital have all provided excellent feedback.' To date, we have distributed more than 4,000 copies of the comic, it has more than 2,000 downloads, and was featured across several newspaper and media outlets on its launch. Among other topics, we have created comics about disability hate crime, the Colombian Peace Agreement, climate change, dental health, COVID-19, organ and tissue donation in Scotland, and collaborated with the Leverhulme Research Centre in Forensic Science to prepare primers for the judiciary, lawyers, police and other professionals involved in legal proceedings on forensic gait analysis (2 volumes), forensic DNA analysis, and the use of statistics. Our comics based on *Frankenstein* have been given away free to schools and educators to promote the novel's connection to Dundee, and we have also created edited collections adapting the works of Walter Scott, HG Wells, and Jonathan Swift, and adaptations of the novel *Odd John* (1935)

by Olaf Stapledon, and the play *R.U.R.* (1920) by Karel Čapek, both of which deal with ethical questions through the genre of science fiction.

Another area of impact arising from our educational comics is the creation of jobs and professional development opportunities for many comics creators, housed within the DCCS through Ink Pot Studio. Creators are responsible for contributing to DCCS and Ink Pot, and these initiatives have become central to our research, impact and public engagement strategies, and creators based at the DCCS have reflected on the significance of the space in supporting the development of their professional careers as well as enhancing their communication and public engagement skills, and providing paid work, as well as free access to studio space. To date, our educational comics project has proved exceptionally adaptable across different modes of engagement via research, knowledge exchange, and in teaching and learning innovation. We have developed the methodology as an example of research-led teaching in several Humanities subjects at Dundee, and in the continuing professional development module 'Creating Public Information Comics', which first ran in 2021, and again in 2022. In the latter module, learners can create their own comics that articulate directly with global challenges and debates such as long-COVID, as well as their own research. One learner was a PhD researcher working with a Scottish charity supporting survivors of sexual abuse. In formal feedback she reflected 'I recognised the value in using this inclusive, visual and participatory approach with the young women accessing the charity' adding 'I plan to pilot a 'visual guide to comic book making' in her ongoing work with the charity.

The value of creating comics through a methodology that invites participation and inclusion is a feature of our methodology as well as a by-product of the historical status of comics – in

the non-Francophone West – as ephemera which held minimal literary or artistic merit. Early comics were ephemera in a material sense—designed to last only a day or two after their publication in Sunday newspapers. The 1950s saw the rise of censorship in comics across the United States and Australia and formalized in the UK in the *Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publishing) Act* of 1955, as authorities became concerned with the alleged detrimental impact of comics on the social behaviour of children and adolescents. In recent decades, this trend has been reversed, as comics have become popular vehicles for social criticism, frequently in the form of autobiography and memoir. For example, since the 1970s, underground comics – *comix* – creators in the United States blazed a path for the expression of discontent and unorthodoxy which provoked shock and outrage. Artists such as Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky, Art Spiegelman, Phoebe Gloeckner, Justin Green, and Gilbert Shelton, among others, explored themes relating to sexuality, drug use, religion, and the countercultural turn by depicting raw details and unruly stories through their highly individualized approach to comics. The stories invite readers to engage with exploratory responses to their communities and cultures. These attributes are evident in an introduction by Edward Said on Joe Sacco's landmark comic, *Palestine*, which was published as a single volume in 2001 by Fantagraphics. Edward Said wrote of comics as an 'antidote' to a 'media saturated world', because they allowed him to 'think and imagine and see differently'. He continues that comics,

> seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures.[5]

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[5] 'Introduction', Joe Sacco, Palestine (Fantagraphics 2001), iv.

The ability of comics to engage readers is important, particularly in relation to complex themes such as trauma and archives, which figure strongly in the realms of both storytelling and the law. In contrast to the bureaucratic striations of modern life, comics can help restore a sense of 'spatial grounding' as they reconstruct lived and imagined experiences through the particularised materiality of the text. This formal playfulness helps generate varied representations of identity and lived experiences, iterations that are particularly vital to supplementing personal, historical, and cultural archives. The plasticity of the comics form allows such narratives to enliven alternate ways of seeing, and in doing so, help denaturalize the operation of normative discourses that either wholly or partially elides these subject positions. As we have written elsewhere, '[a]t the level of content and of form comics pose problems', and as a dialogical mode of inquiry, they 'encourage multimodal problem-solving skills'.[6] Most, though by no means all comics, utilise words and images in their textual composition, asking readers to stich meaning through the collision of these registers and the comics frames that support their interpretation. In the panel below, we describe the significance of this meaning-making in terms of the educative potential of comics through the combination of the (text-heavy) captions and a primary image.

<Insert Figure 3: How Comics Work>

Figure 3: How Comics Work. From *Public Information Comics*. Written by Golnar Nabizadeh and Chris Murray. Art by Letty Wilson. UniVerse, 2019, University of Dundee.

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[6] Christopher Murray and Golnar Nabizadeh, 'Educational and Public Information Comics, 1940s – Present', (2020) 11 Studies in Comics 1, 31.

The central figures hold banners depicting a 'speech balloon' to the left, and a 'thought bubble', which readers will recognise as fundamental containers of communication in comics. This distinction between speech and thought, image and text are just some of the aesthetic, verbal, and structural elements that the reader's act of interpretation brings together. As Herd et al suggest after Heike Elisabeth Jungst, 'the success of information and educational comics partly resides in the fact that they often borrow narrative conventions, visual style and other associations from what [Jungst] calls "donor genres"'.[7] Indeed, playful, parodic, and relational strategies frequently inform the way that information comics disarm readers and invite them to take up the themes and questions being explored.

Turning, then, to the contributions to this symposium, four scholars – Paul Long (Monash), , Christopher Pizzino (University of Georgia), Angus Nurse (Nottingham Trent University), and Ian Horton (University of the Arts, London) were asked to select one or more of the educational comics we have created, and to offer their reflections on these pieces. Paul Long's opening contribution analyses *Archives and Memory*, a comic inspired by Long and Dima Saber's research on the production of citizen archives in and from Syria. Offering an insightful critique of the term 'education comic', Long analyses *Archives and Memory* by focusing on the simultaneous precarity and resilience of archives in spaces of conflict – much like the refugee bodies that inform the comic's storyline – and the ways in which formal *A*rchives, as principal organs of the modern nation state, disavow the embodied 'presence' of refugees. As Long observes, the historical rejection of comics from literary archives injects the text with irony at the level of its form, which also opens debates about the ways in which

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[7] Damon Herd and others, 'Comics Jam: Creating healthcare and science communication comics – A sprint co-design methodology' (2020) 11 Studies in Comics 1, 169.

'the democratisation of the archive is in active dialogue with a continued faith in the integrity of our documentary record of the past and its maintenance.' The dynamic nature of this debate, nimbly captured by the opening contribution, offers an ideal platform from which the symposium launches.

The second contribution by Chris Pizzino considers the representation of personal and historical trauma in *Closure* written by Laura Findlay and drawn by Zuzanna Dominiak. Pizzino focuses on the narrative's resistance towards resolution through an incisive consideration of the text, noting how the work opens with 'a carefully orchestrated conflict of verbal and visual priorities, conveying a sense of uneasy, disrupted expression'. This foregrounds the double meaning of the comic's title – referring to concept that individuals and communities may come to reconcile – at least in part – traumatic events in reckoning with the past. In comics terminology, 'closure' – after EH Gombrich's work on psycho-sensorial perception in art – describes the reader's participation in constructing the text's meaning by supplementing the action contained in each panel via the space of the 'gutter' – the white-space that holds the panels in its midst. By sensitively reflecting on both meanings of closure via the comic's dramatised dialogue between Findlay and Dominiak as characters, Pizzino offers a necessary critique of the term and its popular usage in comics and other cultural forms.

Angus Nurse also considers *Closure*, but this time, focusing on the comic's role in refracting and reflecting traumatic incidents and events in 'mainstream' comics such as *X-Men*, as well as independent works by artists such as Art Spiegelman in *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Nurse's expertise in criminology helpfully extends his analysis into this domain with an in-depth discussion of Tami Amanda Jacoby's work on 'victimisation', the term's multiple

valences in social and political discourse, before he returns to evaluate the concept of closure against a broader appraisal of trauma.

The closing contribution by Ian Horton looks at three comics published by the SCCS; *Public Information Comics*, *Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology*, and *Archives and Memory*. Commencing with a historical overview of how educational comics can impact their readers and audiences, Horton then compares the depiction of the archive in *Chronicle* and *Archives and Memory*, acknowledging the conventionally estranged relationship between comics and archival collections. In his sensitive reading of both texts, Horton's contribution lucidly articulates with the opening piece by Paul Long by critiquing the term 'information comics', taking up Sol M. Davidson's contention that 'impact comics' may be more appropriate as the term denotes a sub-group where 'public relations and even advertising comics to be grouped together with those that provide information'.

Reflecting on Hannah Arendt's concept of law and its relationship with civic and philosophical discourse, Massimo La Torre notes that '[l]aw to Arendt is not there to reduce the number of chances given to human action, but instead to open new ways and novel areas of conduct'. According to this perspective, the law is not a merely regulatory system but one that is also '*constitutive*' (italics in original), and therefore imbricated within the diverse cultures within which it takes shape.[8] The way in which the law is seen, heard and felt can be subtle as well as blatant involving a matrix of physical, affective, cognitive, and biopolitical dimensions, among others. This recognition of the interconnected and multidirectional relationship between law, culture and the humanities informs the work of *Law & Humanities*,

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[8] 'Hannah Arendt and the Concept of Law. Against the Tradition.' 2013. *Archives for Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy*. 99.3, pp. 400-416, p. 400.

and one that generates a dynamic articulation with the complexity of the law, its forms, and the ways in which it is experienced by individuals and communities. Our public information comics project seeks to raise awareness and understanding about a diverse range of topics, themes and debates, each requiring their own constitutive processes.

This project, which began in 2016, but had its roots in earlier research, has evolved significantly since we started. We adopted the term 'public information comics' early on as a way of aligning out objectives with that of our partners and funders, and the public engagement strategies of the University, however, under this umbrella we have also used terms like 'educational comics', 'public engagement comics', and 'applied comics'. More importantly, our aims and strategies have changed too, as we have learned more about this sub-genre of comics. As Horton rightly observes, our comics do far more than simply 'inform' the public. This is one of the reasons that we were keen to have peers and colleagues report on these comics, which has been a very informative exercise, and will allow us to reflect upon this work and its impact more effectively. In the contributions that follow, we see how each comic generates unique communities of discussion and analysis, and how the insights of scholars, comics creators, and readers broadens the connective tissue between materiality, textual production, and the representation of lived experiences. These conversations are invaluable to the understanding of Comics Studies and provide equally helpful rhizomes to a diverse set of fields such as law, memory and cultural studies, psychology, criminology, and cognate areas of inquiry.