

<b>Institution:</b> University of Dundee		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 27 English		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Comics Jam! Engaging the Public using a Comics Co-Design Process		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2016 – present		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor Christopher Murray Dr Golnar Nabizadeh	Chair of Comics Studies Lecturer in Comics Studies	2005 – present 2016 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2016 – present		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact

Research into comics as a medium of public information communication has had interlinked impacts on knowledge and understanding, wellbeing, and creative practice. It underpinned the ‘Comics Jam’ project, resulting in the co-design of 20 educational comics in partnership with charities, creative economies, and the health and education sectors. The comics 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. The project has contributed to the local creative economy, supporting and upskilling 23 comics artists and leading to the creation of a new, independent spin-off.

### 2. Underpinning research

Murray and Nabizadeh are comics scholars with an interest in applied comics. Since 2015 they have built a practice-research infrastructure to support comics creators and to respond to the University of Dundee’s priority to transform lives. This project draws on the findings from their research into comics as a mode of public information communication, and on the ways in which comics can effectively represent memory, trauma and healthcare issues, disrupting existing methods of public communication of these subjects.

The groundwork for the project was laid by Murray’s 2010 monograph on comics as propaganda [R1]. The key findings were that comics, due to their mode of production, can respond quickly to the needs of government campaigns, and through their style and form utilise the levers of entertainment (humour, caricature, fantasy, etc.) to transmit serious messages in accessible ways. This was the first book to explore the relationship between comics and propaganda in a sustained and detailed way.

Later research [R4, R5] established the efficacy of comics to communicate healthcare information to diverse audiences through their formal and stylistic qualities. Nabizadeh found that comics can employ formal or stylistic devices to depict traumatic memory in powerful ways, especially for pasts whose remembrance is compromised or prohibited through other forms [R2, R4]. This helped Murray and Nabizadeh to discover how to lend voice and agency to those with misunderstood illnesses, disabilities or needs (as seen in the comics *Fibromyalgia and Us*, *The Gift*, and *When People Die*). The resulting educational and science communication comics utilised the specific modalities of comics (especially combination of word and image) to present complex information in economical ways [R5, R6].

The research used an innovative eye-tracking methodology to establish that readers tend to fixate on verbal text, and on panels where the main character appears [R3]. Funded by the ESRC (£360,000), this was a novel collaboration between comics scholars and psychology scholars, examining the modalities of text and image, and how the formal elements and content drive the attention of the reader. There was a practice research aspect to this work, involving the creation and manipulation of comics pages for experimental purposes. This helped to calibrate the design of the pages created for the Comics Jam project to maximum effect and informed the participatory iterative co-design process. This research was published in an edited collection which was the first to gather scholarship on empirical approaches to comics, a relatively new area within Comics Studies [R3].

The Comics Jam is a practice research co-design methodology that embeds specialist knowledge, research expertise, and impactful messages in the comics. This enables the deployment of the formal and stylistic properties of comics to present public information messages in ways that disrupt current public information communication practices [R6]. The comics produced, employed the immersive and narrative qualities of the comics medium to provide partners with resources which expanded and enhanced their public communication strategies. The feedback loop developed in this co-design process actively engaged researchers, comics creators, and partners at all stages in order to combine their expertise in the development of solutions to specific public information problems. This led to professional development and knowledge exchange for all involved and allowed us to reach the public in novel ways that were more effective than established practice (text heavy pamphlets, posters, website, etc.). This methodology empowered individuals, communities and stakeholders to work collaboratively with partners and comics creators, and for their experience and perspectives to be valued and visible within a creative process and the resulting output. This approach was more attentive to their needs and therefore more engaging for them, and for the public. A special issue of *Studies in Comics* focusing on comics and education showcased this methodology [R5, R6].

Murray's work on comics as a means of public communication and Nabizadeh's on comics, trauma and memory came together to form the Comics Jam project in 2016. This meeting of research and creative practice had an emphasis on themes of healthcare, science communication and education, which we used to develop a network of partnerships which became the framework for our impact.

### 3. References to the research

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[R1] Murray, C. (2011) *Champions of the oppressed: superhero comics, popular culture and propaganda in America during World War Two*. New Jersey: Hampton Press

[R2] Nabizadeh, G. (2017) 'Visualising risk in Pat Grant's *Blue*: xenophobia and graphic Narrative', *Textual Practice* 31(3) DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2017.1295633](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1295633)

[R3] Kirtley, C., Murray, C., Vaughan, P.V., Tatler, B.T. (2018) 'Reading words and images: factors influencing eye movements in comic reading' in Dunst, A., Laubrock, J., Wildfeuer, J. (eds.) *Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Multimodal, and Cognitive Methods*, New York: Routledge, pp .264-283

[R4] Nabizadeh, G. (2019) *Representation and memory in graphic novels*. London: Routledge DOI: [10.4324/9781315605418](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315605418)

[R5] Murray, C. and Nabizadeh, G. (2020) 'Educational and public information comics, 1940s – present'. *Studies in Comics* 11(1) pp.7-35 DOI: [10.1386/stic\\_00013\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/stic_00013_1)

[R6] Murray, C., Herd, D., Jindal-Snape, D., Sinclair, M. (2020) 'Comics Jam: creating healthcare and science communication comics - a sprint co-design methodology'. *Studies in Comics* 11(1) pp.167-192 DOI: [10.1386/stic\\_00020\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/stic_00020_1)

#### Quality of underpinning research:

ESRC (£360,000): 'Words and Pictures: Understanding How People Gather Information Conveyed Jointly Through Text and Image in Comics' (Joint with University of Aberdeen) ES/M007081/1

#### 4. Details of the impact

The Comics Jam project tackled public information problems associated with misunderstood medical conditions, complex scientific issues and public-interest matters. We developed a network of 18 partners – including charities such as Advocating Together, Fibromyalgia UK, and Organ Donation Scotland, and bodies such as the NHS and Dundee City Council – to create 20 comics through an iterative co-design process (Fig. 1) between 2016 and 2020. Drawing on the findings of the underpinning research, the comics represent emotions, experience and characters in ways that are accessible, empathetic and instructive. The main impacts have been on knowledge and understanding, wellbeing, and creative practice.



Figure. 1 The Comics Jam methodology (artwork by Damon Herd).

#### Knowledge and understanding

The project influenced partners by educating them about the potential of the comics medium to reach the public, disrupting and enhancing their formal communications, engagement and evaluation strategies. Advocating Together, a charity that advocates for adults with learning disabilities, commissioned us to deliver 4 workshops for 6 young people with learning disabilities and/or autism to produce *Tackling Disability Hate Crime*. This comic developed their skills and has been used by the charity to tackle prejudice in the general public. Advocating Together note that this comic is now a resource that is 'always part of any promotional work' and which has been 'shared far and wide in Dundee and nationally' [E5]. *When People Die*, a collaboration with The Children and Young People's Centre for Justice and two bereavement charities, impacted professionals, such as the social workers who

support the bereaved young people [E3]. CHAS (Children's Hospices Across Scotland) describe the comic as an 'invaluable resource' that is used 'with both parents and children to ignite discussions around the impact of death upon them', and which forms an important part of a 'trauma toolkit' for teaching staff working with bereaved children [E7].

The comics have particular benefits for readers seeking to understand emotionally difficult subjects and complex technical information. One NHS Organ Donation ambassador recognised that the pamphlets and posters designed to inform the public about organ donation were inadequate as they failed to address the emotions and experiences of those involved. In partnership with NHS Scotland's Organ Donation Team, we produced *The Gift*, which was used to launch Organ Donation Week in 2018 – described as an 'excellent, thought provoking and innovative resource' [E4].

### **Wellbeing**

The project has engaged with people directly affected by misunderstood and traumatic health conditions, disabilities and circumstances, providing them a voice. *Fibromyalgia and Us* contains four stories from people with fibromyalgia, including the perspectives of family members and professionals. The title has gained traction internationally, with significant media coverage [E1]. 2000 paper copies have been distributed, it has been downloaded 12,627 times across 86 countries (November 2017-December 2020) and it has been translated to Spanish on request [E1]. Its inclusion in an article on *The Mighty* (a digital health community with over 2 million registered users) generated nearly 30,000 views overnight, overwhelming the website as noted by the editor "As soon as we shared our article on social media, it became clear our readers loved the comic — in fact, the following day... the link to download the comic wasn't working because the site had crashed from too many people clicking on it..." [E10]. The comic was distributed to MPs during a fibromyalgia campaign and praised in an Early Day Motion in the UK Parliament [E2].

Over 200 people with fibromyalgia provided spontaneous feedback confirming the impact of the comic, often saying it gave them a better understanding of the condition and providing validation of their experience after years of health-related issues. 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*" [E11]. One participant said it "*had a completely unexpected effect on me. It was a moment of pure catharsis... years of health-related anger and holding health-related information in my head, were gone*" [E6]. On the recommendation of clinical directors, copies were made available in all 64 NHS Tayside surgeries and pain clinics, changing the way NHS Scotland communicated with the public on this issue.

Likewise, *When People Die* gave voice to the often-overlooked experiences of young people receiving support due to bereavement [E3] and was commended by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland [E8]. CHAS noted that the comics allowed the children, who were co-creators of the output, to become what she refers to as 'young ambassadors' [E7], who have been empowered to communicate their stories to peers. The ability to communicate emotions and experiences through the medium of comics allowed those with misunderstood conditions a means to represent their experiences and engage the public, with numerous benefits to wellbeing.

### **Creative practice**

Dundee Comics Creative Space (DCCS), has been supported with an award of £125,000 from the Rank Foundation which provided facilities and studio space for comics creators working on Comics Jam. Twenty three comics creators worked on the Comics Jam project, co-creating 20 comics whilst simultaneously developing skills and expertise that has led to employment, including the creation of an independent spin-off public information comic project, Chip Collective [E9].

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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[E1] Compilation of media coverage and download figures (*Fibromyalgia and Us*)

[E2] Early Day Motion (2019) *Fibromyalgia and Us*, UK Parliament (EDM 2135) Available at: <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/52638/fibromyalgia-and-us> (Accessed 22 March 2021)

[E3] Letter of support from The Children and Young People's Centre for Justice

[E4] Letter of support from NHS National Services Scotland

[E5] Letter of support from Communications Coordinator, Advocating Together

[E6] Feedback from Comics Jam participant – writer of 'Judith's Story' in *Fibromyalgia and Us*

[E7] Letter of support from CHAS (Children's Hospitals Across Scotland)

[E8] Letter of support from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

[E9] Letter of support from Chip Collective

[E10] Letter from editor of The Mighty

[E11] Compilation of feedback from readers of *Fibromyalgia and Us*

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