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Commentary

Using Comics as a Media Literacy Tool for Marginalised Groups: The Case of Athens Comics Library

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Abstract
Comics and graphic novels not only have the power to narrate the stories of superheroes, but they also have the superpower to transfer knowledge. Using pictures and images is a great means to overcome cultural or language barriers and, at the same time, cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and empathy. Among their superpowers is also the ability to teach media literacy. Comics are a visual medium and people tend to react better to visual communication than verbal. Discussing multimodal literacy, we can claim that comics can become an efficient media literacy tool, especially for children, and with a special focus on diversity. In an era where misinformation/disinformation and fake news are all around us, marginalised groups, such as refugee populations, are more vulnerable. At the same time, Covid-19 brought upon us not only an infodemic but also digital inequalities, as several communities are excluded by the digital transformation. In this commentary article, we will present and discuss examples of how Athens Comics Library is using comics in order to provide a more inclusive media literacy education to refugee populations highlighting the correspondence between comics storytelling and media literacy abilities.

Keywords
comics; diversity; media literacy; participatory culture; refugees; storytelling; visual literacy

Issue
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1. Introduction

We are living in the era of Gen-Z, iGeneration, Gen Tech, or Net Gen. Kids, teenagers, and young people who were born in the middle of the 1990s and grew up in parallel with the development and spread of social media and the web 2.0. Always on and connected, they tend to spend millions of hours on Instagram and TikTok, having YouTubers as their influencers. Their personal communication is mostly based on images, symbols, emojis, and digital platforms, and sometimes those are their only public space (Boyd, 2014, p. 21).

At the same time, the pandemic brought upon us a domino of changes in various sectors and created, globally, an environment characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Moreover, Covid-19 caused an infodemic where:

> A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumour, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies affecting national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities. (Rothkopf, 2003)

Therefore, the need for media literacy education became necessary and governments, media, and educational organisations took action in order to equip the citizens with critical abilities in the fight against misinformation and disinformation.

The pandemic had another serious effect: accelerating dramatically existing digital inequalities. In an era where "the status of digital spaces is switching from an amenity to a necessity" (Beaunoyer et al., 2020, p. 2), more and more individuals faced the challenge of feeling

isolated and excluded from a variety of economic, educational, and leisure activities and social interactions. Marginalised communities, such as refugees, socially isolated older adults, or digitally disadvantaged students became more vulnerable having difficulties coping with this new digital transformed environment, leaving themselves unprotected from fake news, misinformation, and disinformation practices.

For children with a refugee or migrant background, those inequalities were reflected in their ability to follow up with the new educational schemes proposed by the pandemic response. The closing of schools across many countries introduced online learning, but:

> Although schools are better equipped with digital tools than ever before, access to digital learning opportunities is still not equal: Children of immigrants tend to be less equipped to face this new transition. In most OECD countries with significant shares of children of immigrants, students with immigrant parents are less likely than students with native-born parents at the age of 15 to have access to a computer and an internet connection at home. (OECD, 2020, p. 15)

In addition, language barriers and the lack of interaction with peers made it even more difficult for those students to succeed in this new way of learning (OECD, 2020).

2. Comics and Media Literacy

Taking into consideration all the above, we may conclude that there is a need for adopting creative and innovative ways of tackling those inequalities and shaping a more inclusive educational system, allowing all diverse communities to gain media literacy skills in order to adapt to the ever-changing current landscape. Comics can serve as such a solution, as they have the superpower to transfer knowledge even to the slowest learners. According to Huda and Saptura (2015, as cited in Arini et al., 2017, p. 75), "learning with using comics a medium can improve the performance of learners, increase active learners, increase inters of students and receive a positive response from students." In addition, comics have certain "superpowers" that make them an efficient educational-learning tool. Skills, such as storytelling, visual literacy, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (Tsene, 2019, pp. 154–183), empathy, seeking and synthesis of information, understanding of reality, and multimedia and transmedia content production are encouraged during the process of reading or creating a comic story.

Comics are a visual medium and human beings tend to respond to visual communication sometimes better than to verbal communication. In a study comparing comics to text, Sones (1944, pp. 232–240) found that comics' visual quality increases learning, while Duncan and Smith (2013, p. 279) stated that the increase in comics use in academics addresses the need to teach different literacies that correspond with the multimodal culture of today's world, a culture that uses "textual, visual, and aural stimuli simultaneously to communicate its message." Comics, according to McCloud (1993), are a medium that allows the audience to become a "willing collaborator," as the reader is asked to fill the gutters between panels, co-creating the story with the writer. In addition, one has to imagine sounds or other effects that cannot be implemented in order to reconstruct meaning in the comic story which is actually a story full of holes (Groensteen, 2011). This collaborative relation between the comic creator and the reader fosters critical thinking and creativity, as the reader "invests his or her own intelligence, imagination and emotion" (Krusemark, 2014, p. 43) during his or her participation in the reading process.

All the aforementioned are very close to the skills suggested by media literacy scholars. According to Collins et al. (2011, pp. 159–185), media-literate citizens have the ability to better understand how a message was created and to construct meaning out of it. If we attempt to move a step forward, we could identify similar skills between Jenkins' (2006) participatory culture and the ability of reading or creating a comic. According to Jenkins (2006) experimentation in problem-solving, mixing media content, evaluating the sources, searching and synthesising information, and following transmedia stories are some of the characteristics and skills gained within the context of collaborative intelligence and participation. Those elements are similar to synthesis, decoding, interpretation, and transmedia navigation that comics reading or creating also suggests.

3. The Case of Athens Comics Library

The Athens Comics Library was designed to be a place of inspiration and creation of experiences, learning and exploration, participation, creativity, and experimentation around a collection of 2,500 comics. The team believes in the healing and educational value of comics and storytelling, an approach that has supported numerous children and families who have fled war and conflict. Their work aims to hold space to share those impactful stories and lived experiences and at the same time encourage people to learn how to listen to someone else's story and realise that humanity is composed of many overlapping stories. Since 2008, they design and facilitate educational workshops, and, since 2016, they have also been active in offering educational programs for refugee children and mothers through the Booster the Emotional Dimension of Social Inclusion for Immigrant Mothers and Children program. Since October 2019, they are operating as Baytna Hub, a program for the education and creative employment of preschool refugee children. Over the past year, the Athens Comics Library has carried out a series of community empowerment projects, with an emphasis on refugee and immigrant families participating in their activities, with comics storytelling as the main platform (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Character design during the Athens Comics Library's workshops.

Inspired by all the aforementioned, Athens Comics Library's workshops are designed in order to introduce to participants the dynamic language of comics and train them to creative thinking, content creation, energetic collaboration, empathy, and other media literacy skills (Figure 2).

There are only seven basic rules during the workshops and those are (Tsene, 2019, pp. 154–183):

- Timeframe: All exercises are completed in a certain, strict timeframe (e.g., five minutes, 10 minutes, etc.).
- Rubbers' prohibition: We do not allow rubbers during the workshops, encouraging the participants to make creative mistakes.
- The "is it ok if" question: This is the most common question we get from participants. Our reply is that everything is ok if it drives forward the story.
- Mind the gutter: The gutter is where the co-creation between the creator and the reader happens. We encourage participants to use this space cleverly.
- The caption: This is one of the most important elements of a comic story, as it is where the narrative

Figure 2. Collaboration during the Athens Comics Library's workshops.

happens. Once again, we encourage participants to use this space mindfully.
- The panel limitation: We usually ask participants to create either six- or nine-panel comics. This limitation assures that we will get complete stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- The "I cannot draw" excuse: Most of the participants often complain that they cannot draw, therefore they cannot participate. We explain to them that, in comics, drawing is communication, so even a stick figure can tell the story.

Behind those rules, there are certain goals, such as creating a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, allowing readers closure with a clear message, taking responsibility for the choices you are making during the content production, or giving the space to readers to interact with the message. As we know, today we are experiencing the epitome of the era of the prosumer of the content, where content production is as critical as content consumption. By encouraging the participants to create a comic story, we are encouraging them to do the research, validate information, take decisions, and, in the end, the responsibility of sharing the content with an audience. And then, some questions follow. How do pictures and words work complementary in a comic story? What is the information I have to use in my story and what is not needed? How do the different balloons work? What is the gutter and what is its role in the comic format? How can we tell a totally different story with the exact same pictures if we just change the wording, addressing a different audience? Those questions again enable the participants to expose themselves to multimodal literacies and audiences and to better understand the mechanisms of composing a complex message today. Finally, by reading each other's stories, participants have the opportunity to reflect on their own reality and truth and to witness alternative truths, shaping a better understanding of the world, feeling connected, but also to stand critically towards the content/messages they receive everyday (Figure 3).

4. Reflections and Conclusions

Comics are a narrative medium with many perspectives and for sure they can be used as an efficient teaching tool encouraging equal participation, creativity, and critical thinking. Our risk and fast-changing society demands a flexible and more inclusive educational system in order to equip all citizens with media literacy skills. Arts-based teaching programs are gaining ground as they "teach us to judge in absence of rules, to appraise the consequences of one's choices and to revise and then to make other choices" (Eisner, 2004, as cited in Romanowska et al., 2013, p. 1005). So, what can comics teach about media literacy? Creativity, collaboration, teamwork, storytelling skills, content production, empathy, research, and validation are some of the answers.

Figure 3. A comic story created during the Athens Comics Library's workshops.

If we would like to discuss media literacy with children and marginalised communities in an alternative way and offer them a variety of motivations, comics can be an interesting platform. As McLuhan (1964) has stated, comics are cool media, in contrast with the hot ones, such as movies. According to him, hot media demand little interaction as in a way they spoon-feed the content, while cool media engage all senses and demand a great deal of interaction. Let communities experiment and interact with cool comics and discover on their own the capabilities that will allow them to become more active citizens.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

Lida Tsene is passionate about communication, holding a degree in communication, media, and culture and a PhD in social media and social responsibility. She has been teaching communications since 2010 and working in the field for more than 10 years. She is head of PR, Art, and Educational Programs of Comicdom Con Athens and founder of the Athens Comics Library.