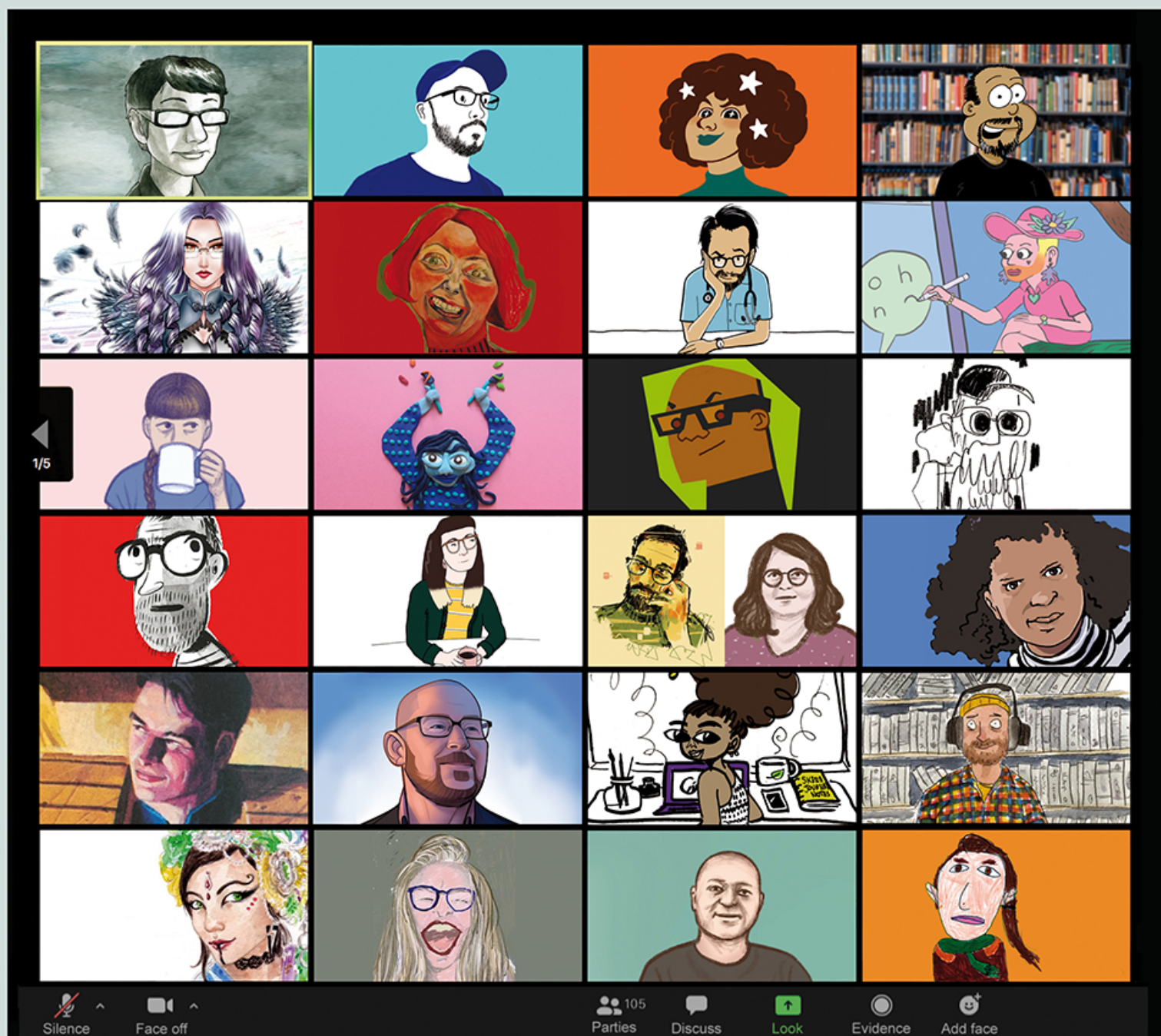




UK COMICS  
CREATOR SURVEY

# LET'S FIX COMICS



A write-up and break-down of the  
*UK Comics Creator Survey 2020*  
follow-up discussion events

KATRIONA CHAPMAN

# If you wanted to change the comics industry, where would you even begin?

This is the question Hannah Berry, the 2019-21 UK Comics Laureate, asks in the foreword of the **UK Comics Creators research report** - a project she undertook as part of her tenure as Laureate. The goal of the Laureate position is to elevate awareness and appreciation of comics as an art-form. Comics are such a unique and exciting storytelling medium, but they very much occupy a small, undervalued niche within the UK cultural landscape. Many in the industry struggle to make a viable living creating comics, and many feel that there's huge potential to expand readership and explore the power that comics can have in terms of culture, literacy and creativity.

"The ecosystem here in the UK is unique: we don't have the production and retail infrastructures of the US; we don't have the social and cultural acceptance of France; we don't have the nation-wide readership of Japan."  
- **The UK Comics Creators research report**

The report was published in June 2020 and collected data via a survey that aimed to explore:

- Who is working in the sector?
- What are their career paths and motivations?
- What are the barriers they face?

The report can be read at: <http://hannahberry.co.uk/survey/>

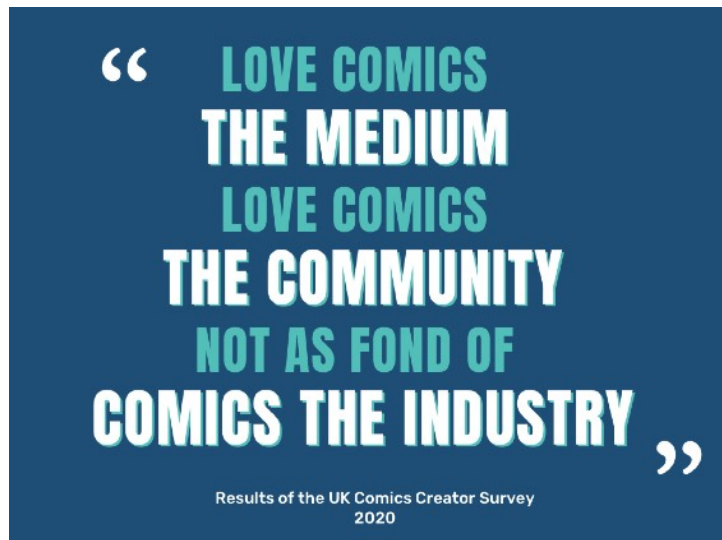
In autumn 2020 Hannah also concluded a series of five online forums which have opened up the results of the survey for discussion. The goal of the forums was to identify the steps we need to take to better support the fledgling UK comics industry.

Each talk was attended by around a hundred comic creators, publishers, and event organisers; taking Hannah's original questions and expanding them into a huge collective debate on topics such as business models, audiences, education and diversity. What follows is a report on those talks.



Survey, live events and write-up also supported by:





The first of the forums was a general one, aimed at answering questions about the survey itself; how it was developed and conducted. The subsequent forums were organised into four topics based on the four main areas of concern that arose out of the survey results:

- **Money** - Comic production does not pay a living wage.
- **Access** - The established industry appears cliquey, discriminatory, and difficult to access.
- **Audience** - There is a need for strategic development of audiences and markets.
- **Professionalism** - The comics industry needs to be more professional.

Firstly it's probably important to address the term *industry*, as many involved in comics the UK feel that that term doesn't really represent the current state of comics-making in the UK. The comics community has historically been fairly dispersed, with many separate branches. Although these forums were open to everyone working in comics, looking at attendees it was noted that there were groups who were not really represented (for example those working in the more mainstream, superhero field.)

It can be hard to find one-size-fits-all solutions when the work going on is so disparate, but the high attendance at these forums showed that there is a huge collective will to better collaborate moving forward, and develop goals that will benefit all those involved in comics.

Even before the last of the forums had taken place, people involved in earlier forums had already started to take action, for example establishing the **Comics Creators Network** (see page 7 for more on the CCN.)

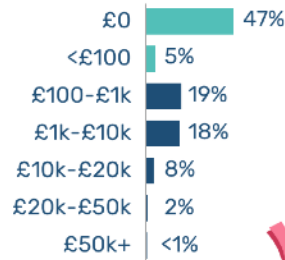
Considering that there has been such a positive and enthusiastic response to the forums, and that their goal was to identify practical ways forward, the points discussed in this write-up have been divided into two categories: **thinking points** and **action points**.

**Action points** include ideas and suggestions that people can act on right away, while **thinking points** include more general ideas that are worth considering and may form the basis for further discussion.



# COMICS PRODUCTION DOES NOT PAY A LIVING WAGE

**MORE THAN HALF** of creators  
earn nothing, or less than  
£100/year from comics



WE NEED: to  
raise industry standards;  
pay that better matches the  
levels of work involved; and help  
negotiating deadlines and  
balancing  
work / life.

## Money

***Comics production does not pay a living wage.***

“I have largely come to terms with the fact that it would be impossible/incredibly stressful to attempt to make comics my primary source of income.”

- The UK Comics Creators research report

This panel took place on the 16th of September 2020.

Panel Guests: esteemed comics and Manga artist and Company Secretary of Sweatdrop Studios, **Sonia Leong**; award-winning cartoonist, author and illustrator **Stephen Collins**; Hot-off-the-press author and co-moderator of the *Let's Talk Pricing* feedback group, **Charlot Kristensen**; industry veteran and co-publisher of Soaring Penguin, **Tim Pilcher**; and Thought Bubble Festival Administrator and co-creator of the Fair Pay For Artists Campaign, **Chloe Green**.



Hannah was inspired to ask the question *how can things be better for creators* based on her experiences working in comics with all the advantages you could hope for - book deals with a large publisher, arts council funding - and yet finding that she was unable to make a living.

The survey found that the two main challenges facing creators are: **lack of financial income** (or lack of expectation of it in the future,) and **lack of time to create**. The two being linked in the sense that those working day jobs can struggle to find enough time to also create comics.

87% of respondents receive income from one or more jobs unrelated to their comics production. 14% of creators said comics was their primary occupation but not their primary source of income.

Creators were also asked to define comics as either 'current career,' 'seeking career' or 'hobby' and 63% stated it was their current career. 48% stated that they only make comics in their spare time, which means that 1 in 10 creators see their current career as something they only do in their spare time.

People want to create comics, but can't justify it financially. It's a labour of love for many, including some of those working in comics publishing even. The fact that comics are labour intensive to produce can mean that it's difficult to make enough for everyone involved to be paid fairly, unless sales are really high, and in the UK substantial sales can be hard to achieve.

### **Perceptions of comics and the value of creative work. Why is the UK comics market so small?**

In France a bestselling comic might sell 150,000 whereas in UK the figure might be closer to 5000.

The lack of money in the sector may reflect issues with the public perception of comics, and how arts in general are valued in society. **The Royal Society of Literature** conducted the *A Room of my Own* survey of writers in 2019 (<https://rsliterature.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/RSL-A-Room-of-My-Own-Report-19-June-2019.pdf>.) and the **Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society** also do regular surveys (<https://www.alcs.co.uk/news/authors-earnings-research-researchers-publish-full-report>.)

Results of these show that writers may find it equally hard to earn a living in the UK: the RSL's survey found that 70% of writers earned less than £5,000 in 2018/19, compared to 66% of comics creators according to the UK Comics Creators Survey.

There is an ongoing issue that it can be hard to get fairly paid as a creator when there are always new/inexperienced creators arriving on the scene and predatory publishers/commissioners know they are easily exploited. Many creators are not good at sufficiently valuing their work, perhaps because historically it has always been undervalued by others? Are creators partly responsible for not demanding more? Are there ways creators can remind people of/insist on the value of their work? One suggestion - based on the **Association of Illustrators'** 'Price it Right' campaign - is that creatives should pitch their ideal price for work, and if it gets bargained down, invoice for their original price and include the lower price as a 'goodwill discount.'

Comics are very expensive to produce; they take creators a long time and usually involve printing in full colour. Graphic novels can cost four times as much to print as a book with text in black and white. However films are also very expensive to produce; yet they are an enormous industry, there is great demand for them and there are more funds available for those working in the film sector.

**Comparison with other sectors within the arts:** We lack institutions like the Royal Opera House/British Film Institute who have a role in producing art/supporting production. There are no regular radio 4 shows about graphic novels like there are about other art-forms. Prose books are treated with much higher esteem than comics, even lightweight prose books like thrillers and romance get more coverage than comics in the national press.

There is a sense that the perception of comics in the wider publishing industry (and in the general public) is changing, but slowly. Are we perhaps where France was 40 years ago? Understanding seems to be growing that a comic can be about anything... that it's not a medium just for kids, or superheroes, or newspaper comic strips. Yet we all run into people all the time who don't know much about comics and/or don't understand how to read them.

Publishers have been starting to show more interest in comics, but there is a sense that a few years ago there was a trend towards publishing more comics which is now waning again. Perhaps there aren't enough people in publishing houses who understand the medium and the market well? They may try a comic, not market it well and then give up on comics. Many creators that have published comics through traditional routes have experienced their books not selling well. Publishers sometimes have to pulp books as warehousing becomes expensive for a title that doesn't sell.

Is it difficult to get comics for children published in the UK? The survey showed the majority of creators were creating work for adults. But some creators feel this has improved and publishers/bookshops are now much more open to the idea of comics.

In terms of pay, some creators who've been working in traditional publishing for several decades (children's books) have found that the pay they're able to get for book projects now is sometimes a quarter of what they used to earn when they started. The industry has declined.

Yet there is a huge readership for manga, and huge range of genres/subject matter in manga, so there is a case for comics readership to expand. If it's possible however, we should try to avoid the over-saturation of the market and subsequent devaluation of publications that's happened in France recently. (**Recent French comics readership survey:** <https://www.actuabd.com/Enquete-les-Francais-et-la-bande-dessinee-un-art-qui-fait-l-unaninite>)

Is it possible to set ourselves on a good path now and avoid that situation further down the line?

See **Audience** section for more on perceptions of comics, and how we might be able to grow the readership of comics in the UK.

### **Art vs commerce**

Some feel that there are two distinct sides to the UK comics scene: Those who view creative work along the lines of fine art vs those who view their work as a commercial art. There is a divide, with the two sides have different values/priorities. This divide could certainly be seen during the discussions, with some people expressing more interest in art, creativity and the grassroots level of comics creation, and others expressing more interest in ways to make comics more viable from a business point of view.

Hopefully though, both groups are able to see the value in bringing comics to a wider audience and providing support for creators.

### **The need for transparency/advocacy**

The importance of openness, collaboration and discussion: the recent #publishingpaidme event on twitter showed that there was a need for greater transparency about what people in the sector are paid, and about the working practices of publishers.

Can we create a Bill of Rights, or a document outlining goals for good working practices for the industry?

The **Thought Bubble Fair Pay for Artists Survey 2018/19** found that a large percentage of creators based their pricing on guesswork.

See **Let's Talk Pricing** below, for a great way that creators can already find help/support each other with pricing and other issues such as contracts etc. Also see below for details of the newly-established Association of Comic Creators!

Agents can advocate for creators - literary agents take less commission than illustration agents in the UK, and many creators recommend them over illustration agents based on personal experience. It can be easier to get an agent interested if you already have interest from a publisher. Should agents be standard for comic creators?

Unions: In 1978, a group of A-list comics creators in the US calling themselves the **Comic Book Creators Guild** gathered together to attempt to unionise. One of the things the group did was put together a list of recommended rates for publishers. The union ultimately didn't work out, and unfortunately the very reasonable rate targets they agreed on still aren't hit today by many publishers, even adjusted for inflation. But there's no reason why it can't be tried again!

The **Society of Authors** already act as a trade union for writers/illustrators and they welcome comic creators. They have recently added under their umbrella the newly-created **Comics Creators Network** - a peer support network for comic creators specifically. More on this in the following section:

### **Possibilities for creators who want to earn more money from their work in comics:**

**Direct income:** Traditional publishing, self publishing, webcomics, commercial commissions, work for hire, periodic publications, licensing.

**Indirect income:** Workshops, talks, teaching, private commissions, merchandise.

The **Thought Bubble Fair Pay for Artists Survey 2018/19** showed that Thought Bubble exhibitors made the most money at the festival through commissions rather than comic sales.

Apply to join the **Let's Talk Pricing** Facebook discussion group for artists.

Many used to rely on the Association of Illustrators pricing guides to help them quote prices for jobs, but for legal reasons the AOI is no longer able to publish pricing guides (it's deemed price fixing.) Pricing questions tend to link to contract and rights questions too, which the **Let's Talk Pricing** group may also be able to help with.

The crowdfunding model can work well - creators get paid upfront, you can assess demand for the project upfront which takes the guesswork out of deciding on print runs. You can have two launches: the early-adopter kickstarter backers, then you can launch again once the book is released (to shops etc.) Also backers get a sense of excitement at helping the project in development.

**Work smart:** the idea that instead of hoping to get the correct pay for the work you do, sometimes it can be better to do work for the pay you get. Know your speed, and if a client is unwilling to pay enough, just do the work to the standard they are paying for. This can be hard for perfectionists, but it can be a way to prevent being exploited.

Creators should be taking advantage of online means to create connections with readers and increase their income as well as focusing on getting work into print. **Patreon/Ko-Fi** etc. Creating both digital content and print content can cover different bases and reach different groups of readers. A strong online presence and putting out digital work can create bonds with fans, while physical books have tangible appeal and will be treasured.

**Branding.** It's a word that people hate but can be useful if you want people to find your work! People are interested in the person behind the work. If this feels uncomfortable, one option is to form a collective and focus on group promo. This also allows you to pool resources and divide up tasks. As with anthologies, you can have a bigger presence as a team. Even just showing work-in-progress/process content online helps people connect with your work. Think of it as a presence rather than a brand. Find ways to do it that feel authentic to you. Curate other people's work that you like. This helps create a network!

### **Support options for creators:**

Exciting news! A brand new group the **Association of Comic Creators** has been created in response to some of these developments.

They are dedicated to fostering a comics culture that supports and uplifts creators and the industry as a whole via the following aims:

- Encouraging transparency within the industry by sharing information on pay and working conditions.
- Creating a welcoming, nurturing space for new creators, building on the strengths of our industry to encourage and support the future of comics.
- Championing creators and comics, making this a viable profession for everyone regardless of race, gender or sexuality.
- Promoting health and well-being by educating creators, employers and readers alike about healthy work habits and release schedules.
- Providing a central point of contact for comics professionals and non-professionals alike, with strength in numbers driving our ability to affect change.

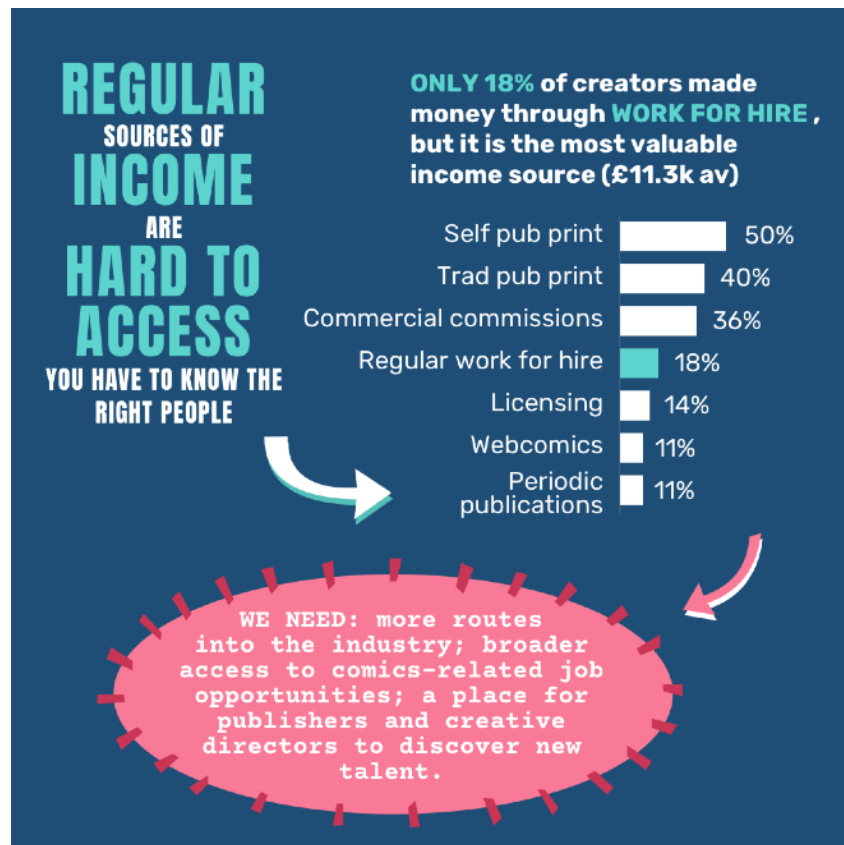
They are doing a lot of work already to address many of the issues raised here, they're already compiling resources on many themes including work opportunities, publisher feedback, printers, events, contracts etc. They also need people to help in various ways, so have a look and see if your skills could be put to use!

**See end of document for details of how to join.**

The **Society of Authors** have been involved in these forums and are encouraging comic creators to join. They're a UK trade union for all types of writers, illustrators and literary translators, at all stages of their careers. They offer unlimited advice to creators including pricing advice and contract vetting. They also administer grants and prizes, and currently have funds to award contingency grants to creators whose income has been affected by Covid. Membership costs approx £100 annually and there are various concessions available.

The brand new **Comics Creators Network** has also emerged in response to the survey - it's a specialised branch of the **Society of Authors** and is a member-led online community for comics creators to unite over common challenges, share experiences, offer advice and make new connections. At time of writing there is a 20% discount on membership available here: <https://www2.societyofauthors.org/comics-creators-network/>





## Access

*The established industry appears cliquy, discriminatory, and difficult to access.*

“To this day it still feels like a bit of a boys club in some areas ... I have yet to find a way to open that door effectively without getting extremely lucky.”

- The UK Comics Creators research report

This panel took place on the 29th of September 2020.

Panel Guests: Artist, author and comics industry veteran **Patrice Aggs**; director of Comics Salopia and ICE festivals **Shane Chebsey**; co-founder of comics publisher BHP, the 9 Panels Agency and Glasgow Comic Con **Sha Nazir**; host of WIP Comics group and podcast and founder of Hackney Comic & Zine Fair **Joe Stone**; and author, academic and co-founder of LDComics **Dr Nicola Streeten**.



- What constitutes 'success' in the comics world?
- Who gets to have it?
- Is it a meritocratic free-for-all or are there gatekeepers?
- What barriers and prejudices do creators face?
- Is it all about who you know?
- Who gets to tell their stories?

## The industry in general

Issues of accessibility can vary depending on whether we mean access to be able to make comics as a full-time career, or access just to be able to make comics on a small scale as many do for fun. Some creators love work that's not commercial, and aren't interested in working in the institutional side of publishing. The **micropublishing/small press scene** seems to be particularly vibrant and thriving at the moment. The internet has helped individuals be able to share work easily without going down traditional publishing routes. And for creators there can be more freedom in small press. Micro-publishers can be more free to publish an interesting range of work... they don't necessarily need to chase huge bestsellers to fund their businesses.

The traditional publishing industry can be very rigid. There can be all sorts of barriers in the system for creators - creators can find it hard to reach publishers... some bigger publishers can be reluctant to deal with creators without agents, and others might be reluctant to deal with agents. To many UK literary agents & publishers, comics are still a relatively new phenomenon and they seem uncertain how to best handle them.

Might there be ways of bringing more readers into the more grassroots/small press level of the scene, to broaden the landscape of publishing?

Can we encourage a broader range of young people into the sector (and also broaden comics readership) via more school/college outreach events?

## Events

At one point there were no UK conventions... creators used to have to go to Angoulême to meet and mingle with other creators/publishers. The increase in the number of events has been a huge change to the way people can access the scene - though the number of events continues to fluctuate. Many regular events such as the **Alternative Press Festival**, **Caption** in Oxford, **Bristol Comic and Zine Fair** and **Comiket** have disappeared over the last ten years, and newer events like **Hackney Comic & Zine Fair** have been established in recognition that their place needs to be filled. In London particularly, the cost of venues can make events harder to organise.

There are pros and cons to an increased number of events vs a small number: a smaller number (scarcity) can mean greater excitement surrounding the event, higher attendance & exhibitors are likely to do good business. With a greater number of conventions, organisers have to work harder to advertise them and bring in visitors. Having more events in a wider range of locations around the country can mean better accessibility for fans and exhibitors alike. Yet if the market for comics remains small, a greater number of events can dilute attendance to each event.

Organisers have to consider accessibility of shows/events for attendees, and should aim for as broad an audience as possible. Is the event affordable to attend? In a location that's accessible? Is it affordable for exhibitors?

The location of events can be an issue. Events in the UK can be very London-centric. **Thought Bubble's** move from Leeds to Harrogate - is Harrogate as welcoming/accessible as Leeds for all? Some felt it had a much more middle class and less diverse feel as a location.

To newcomers, events can be alienating/confusing. Yet some events handle this well.

Different events can fill different niches in the industry. The **Hackney Comic & Zine Fair** aimed to make outreach a priority - with the goal of bringing in new readers and exposing new audiences to comics.

**LDComics** (formerly Laydeez Do Comics) run regular events with the goal of making a space for women/female-identifying creators and readers. It's also become a place for publishers/reviewers to seek out new creators. The survey showed that the number of women involved in comics drops off massively around the age of 30. **LDComics** organisers feel that this is borne out in what they see from the creators they showcase - that older women often come back to comics once they've had families and/or other careers.

## Gender

The Comics Creators Research Report revealed more gender disparity than many expected. This may be somewhat due to the differences between the indie scene and the mainstream - many of those involved in the survey and these talks work within the indie scene and there may be more gender disparity in the mainstream (e.g the 'Big Four' - Marvel etc.)

The survey was open to both professionals and 'hobbyists' alike - could this have skewed the results? Respondents were asked to self-identify. Are women in the 'hobbyist' category less likely to put themselves forward as a 'creator' than men? Research has shown that statistically women are more likely to classify themselves as not as far along in their career than men who are at the same level. There is a psychological factor - women are more likely to nominate themselves in an 'up and coming' category for an award than men are. Similarly, people from marginalised backgrounds can have an "I can't see so I can't be" mindset.

Comicsgate - does something like that put women off coming into the field?

There is general agreement that the UK comics scene has become more open to women and non-binary creators and readers. Twenty to thirty years ago, for example, comic shops could be much less welcoming to women than they are now.

## Access for BAME creators

Comparing the demographics in the survey to the country as a whole: 90% in the survey identified as being from a white ethnic background, compared to 87% in the 2011 census. But many comics hubs are in very ethnically diverse metropolitan areas such as London and Leeds... shouldn't there be more representation?

Is there an issue with people from marginalised backgrounds not knowing how to access events/groups/industries? And do they struggle to have the confidence to put themselves forward? It may not be a question so much of who's in the room, but who feels they can access the room.

Has the aim to improve the inclusion of BAME creators in the comics sector been lip service so far, or has it had any real results?

There is a feeling that so far there's still a long way to go.

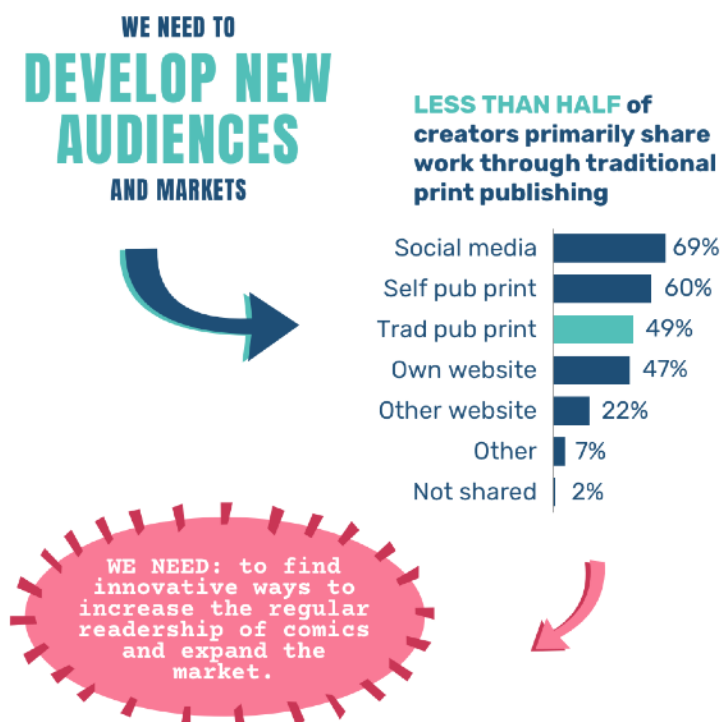
Are quotas a good idea? Quotas can be a starting point, but hopefully things can improve beyond them. Token efforts aren't a long-term solution - it's bringing people in but not ensuring that they want to or are able to stay. It's important to provide the structure that will enable a lasting rather than a token presence. Tokenism is why it perhaps still feels like there's not much real progress being made, although it was also noted that even if your presence feels tokenistic early on, it still may allow you to facilitate further entry for others from your position on the inside.

**Intersectionality** - the lack of opportunities in the sector also falls very much along class/economic lines. If people at entry level aren't able to earn a living, regardless of their background, they are being excluded. Excluding those who can't afford to work for free will disproportionately affect certain groups of society and prevent them from having a voice.

**There is a power imbalance in the industry.** You can argue that getting young people involved in making comics is empowering kids to share their voice/work, and that this will help broaden/diversify the scene. Yet there's no point encouraging kids into creating comics when it's an industry where it may not be welcoming to all and where it's very hard to make a living. Even at the self-publishing/grassroots level, which is fairly accessible without having to deal with gatekeepers, there may be printing costs, tabling costs, travelling etc. The demands of travel and tabling can also exclude creators with disabilities.

Can we develop more effective communal tables to represent creators at events who are unable to travel to events?

One obvious solution to the issue of economic barriers to self-publishing and publishing printed comics, is the webcomic option. Webcomics can be hugely effective, free to distribute, and can end up generating income for creators. However even with webcomics there can still be an economic barrier at entry level as you need to have time to create work. More on webcomics in the next section.





## Audience

***There is a need for strategic development of audiences and markets.***

“What’s it all for? If you’re not reaching new audiences and readerships, what’s the point?”

- The UK Comics Creators research report

This panel took place on the 13th of October 2020.

Panel Guests: award-winning author and Head of Marketing at Avery Hill Publishing **Katriona Chapman**; award-winning author and teacher **Karrie Fransman**; famous and award-winning webcomics creator **Alex Norris**; editor of the award-winning PanelxPanel and YouTuber **Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou**; and award-winning author and founder of Graphic Medicine **Dr Ian Williams**.



- Who are we making comics for?
- How can we reach outside of our bubble?
- What barriers are we facing?
- What creative manoeuvres can we pull?

### **Issues with how comics are viewed**

There’s often a hierarchy in how different art-forms are viewed.

In our society we’re taught as children to read picture books, then taught to move beyond pictures to language. We learn about the power of language but not images. Comics are widely seen as being only suitable for a certain age group or reading ability level.

**Bookscan** data (for North America) shows huge comics sales in kids/YA areas. Scholastic has great success selling directly to schools. But as readers get older they’re often weaned off comics in favour of more ‘high-brow’ art forms.

Occasionally famous graphic novels like *Maus* may be taught in higher education, but they’re not very widely taught as texts. Titles like *Maus* are sometimes seen as exceptions to the rule that comics are a lightweight art-form. Established/traditional media outlets are more likely to pay attention to comics that are literary or highbrow (The Guardian etc.) Highbrow newspapers are also often more resistant to printing comics as part of their content too - they view them as something tabloids have.

TV has also historically been viewed as lowbrow, but that is starting to change so perhaps there's hope for a similar shift in the way comics are viewed.

Is the key creating more demand from audiences that don't currently read comics... making more people aware of the diversity of subject matter and styles of comics? Many aren't aware of comics outside of superheroes/*The Beano*. **Is the success of superhero titles/*The Beano* the reason why in the UK comics have historically not been taken seriously as an art-form?**

Another thinking point: Is the term **graphic novel** problematic?

Many have argued that calling long-form comics 'graphic novels' creates a hierarchy by aligning long-form comics with the world of literature while leaving 'comics' to its low-brow associations. But also does the term 'graphic novel' sufficiently convey how much artistry is involved? Does 'graphic novel' imply that the book is basically an expensive novel?!

Does 'graphic novel' also imply that all GNs are fiction/stories? What about non-fiction?

'Comics' certainly seems more inclusive and neutral as a term, but it can be useful to distinguish between different types of comics when marketing, reviewing or categorising them.

There is a huge market for comics that aren't weighty graphic novels too. Webcomics can be short, funny and immediate. There is potential in webcomics because there aren't that many people making webcomics compared to how big the audience is.

Internet audiences maybe don't distinguish so much between 'comics readers' and 'non-comics readers,' because you come across comics all the time (e.g on Instagram.) Publishing webcomics can generate a more direct connection to audiences. The other advantage to creating webcomics is more artistic freedom!

## Outreach

Can we learn from the world of advertising? Communication and outreach is necessary to spread the word. There is more and more material adapted from comics on **Netflix**, for example, but many viewers aren't necessarily aware of the comics connection.

Could we leverage young influencers who act in comics-based TV and films to help spread the word to a new generation of comics readers?

**Germany** is a great example of a country that took action to grow its market for comics.

There, a group of publishers co-operated to print 80,000 flyers to promote graphic novels but also explain what comics are and why they are important as a medium. German websites that promote comics:

[www.reprodukt.com](http://www.reprodukt.com)

[www.graphicnovel.info](http://www.graphicnovel.info)

Could we organise something similar in the UK?

Also 'audience' doesn't necessarily have to be thought of in terms of sales. If a creator gives a talk, there may only be a couple of people there who might buy their book, but they will have helped increase awareness of the medium. Creators and publishers can work as comics ambassadors. There is also a role for criticism in deepening the appreciation of comics. Good criticism can expand readership but also help foster more appreciative readers/readers who want to explore/buy more comics.

Could we do a campaign like **Poems on the Underground**, but educating people about comics? Something with a really broad outreach is needed to help raise the profile of comics.

**The Royal Society of Literature Literature Matters Awards.** The RSL are looking for proposals of projects to fund, especially “ones which may connect with audiences or topics outside the usual reach of literature and/or may generate public discussion about why literature matters.” The awards are open to comics, so consider applying!  
<https://rsliterature.org/award/rsl-literature-matters-awards/>

## Education

In the education sector, can we open up discussion about the efficacy of comics? Some educators and parents see comics as only suitable for children who can't read well. Yet many others are interested in their potential benefits and uses. In 2014 Diana Marques published an article **Sequential Art in Science** about how the unique qualities of comics can be particularly effective in communicating complicated subjects. **Dundee** and **Sheffield Hallam** Universities have both done research into how it's easier to retain information presented in comic form rather than text. There are similar studies into how information presented in podcast form with sound design (music, sounds, pacing) can be easier to digest and retain than plain speech.

There can also be specific advantages for people who learn in a different way - **dyslexic/neurodiverse/kinesthetic** learners.

Can we collect studies such as this to help state the case for their importance in education?

## New approaches

There is the potential to think larger scale when considering audiences... outside of the realm of books/newspapers/bookshops/traditional publishing. There is a lot of work creators could do in comics outside of this area.

Creators should think about what the medium of comics is good at, and where these specific qualities might be usefully applied. Comics are good at communicating with people from a really broad range of backgrounds, e.g from different parts of the world. There are lots of potential uses in the education and literacy fields.

Comics have the power to make ideas less elitist, for example they can bring life to ideas from academic journals/reports that not many people would've read otherwise.

There is potential for collaborations with NGO's, or projects like **Positive Negatives** (<https://positivenegatives.org>) who use comics to talk about humanitarian issues (telling the stories of refugees etc.) **Positive Negatives** combine ethnographic research with illustration, adapting personal testimonies into art, education and advocacy materials.

Who has stories to tell, and how can we collaborate with them to help tell those stories? We should aim to reach way outside our standard definition of audiences.

As a creator - you can consider taking yourself out of 'the comics scene' and into another field where your comics skills might be useful/valued.

Comic creators can tend to be obsessed with the form, rather than thinking about what could be done with it.

A useful exercise can be working from a starting point of 'what might people want to read' rather than 'what do I want to make.'

## Success stories

**Graphic medicine** is a classic success story of bringing comics to a wider readership. By entering the discourse of healthcare, comics creators have accessed a far broader audience than those who regularly read comics. In North America people are teaching graphic medicine modules on academic courses.

**Graphic medicine** can encompass comic essays, comics about people's experiences of illness/healthcare. They can have an education function for both for patients and practitioners.

Autobiographical and biographical comics are also a success story in terms of reaching broadsheet journalists and other literary audiences.

Also graphic non-fiction can bring in a broader readership: *Rumble Strip* by Woodrow Phoenix or the work of Daryl Cunningham. Books about a particular subject or issue first and foremost, that will introduce the comic form to readers who want to read about that subject regardless of how it's presented.

## Libraries/bookshops/websites

**Libraries** have been one of the groups that have particularly embraced graphic medicine... librarians have helped get comics into healthcare libraries. However there are some barriers for small-scale creators and publishers trying to get their books into libraries via the traditional route. Large publishers distribute news of new releases to library buyers via **Netgalley** and **Edelwiess**, databases which involve fees that can exclude small publishers.

Might there be a way to bulk access these databases as a large comics collective?

There are some new websites that seem promising for spreading the word about comics.

**Storygraph** has emerged as a potential alternative to **Goodreads**. Readers can take a survey and get recommendations of books to read, and comics are included.

Can we get more comics listed there?

**bookshop.org** is big in the US already and is acting as an alternative to **Amazon**. They also curate recommendation lists for readers and support local bookshops by directing readers to buy via them. They are keen to have more comics represented.

**Bookshops** can have a role in elevating the profile of comics, and many small shops already do this well. There is a dilemma with larger chains such as **Waterstones**, where systemic issues surrounding how books are classified/managed by separate section managers can make it hard for staff wanting to change the way comics are presented. It has been widely discussed that large bookshops keeping graphic novels contained in a comics section can limit the number of customers who see comics when browsing. Often comics sections are close to fantasy or sci-fi sections and may not help non-comics-readers realise the breadth of subject-matter on offer in comics form. It's been suggested that placing comics into other sections of the shop by genre/subject-matter would help make comics more visible and more accepted. Often staff are open to this idea, but can run into complications when it come to how the shop systems work which can get in the way.

It would be good to further explore whether changes can be made to the way comics are sold via large bookshops.

Similarly to libraries, bookshop buyers access book data from a database (**Nielsen**) and usually order through **Bookscan** which is Nielsen's ordering directory. Individuals and small publishers can buy barcodes themselves and get their data into Nielsen. Creators can also approach shops directly and ask if there's interest in their book being stocked... some creators have had success getting large chains to place big orders by marketing directly to them. Also local shops/branches are often open to having books by local authors, and having signed copies etc.





### Professionalism

*The comics industry needs to be more professional.*

“Despair of the industry - general lack of business planning and professionalism and regular ethical pratfalls.”

- The UK Comics Creators research report

This panel took place on the 27th of October 2020.

Panel guests: comics creator, podcaster and educator **Dan Berry**; comics creator and co-founder of the Association of Comic Creators **Jennie Gyllblad**; comics writer, film-maker and previous Film & TV Charity consultant **Sara Kenney**; comics creator and Senior Research Fellow at UWE Bristol **Simon Moreton**; and comics creator, author and Society of Authors Management Committee member **Woodrow Phoenix**.



## How has the UK comics community changed over time?

Historically, comics in the UK have been siloed... by genre, by publisher... these discussion events have been important in their efforts to foster greater cooperation in order to build the structural framework for creators to be able to make comics in a sustainable way. Most organisation along these lines so far has been on a very small-scale grassroots level... we are at a point where we need a collective voice as an industry.

We need a healthy ecosystem of creatives, shops, printers, publishers, events etc, all working together. This ecosystem needs to support different kinds of value, not just economic... and elevating marginalised voices should be a priority.

**The Association of Comic Creators** (discussed in the 'Money' section) aim to make the industry less opaque. They're already taking steps to create a centralised community management hub - a non-public collaborative space for this work to begin. A website is underway but in the meantime people are gathering on Discord (see end of document for information on joining.) They aim to crowdsource/pool the collective experience and knowledge of creators into resources for all in the industry to consult. They are building a data team to research the area of pricing, and are also building a list of people with different specialist backgrounds who are willing to contribute expertise.

Join up to see what's happening and consider offering your expertise if you want to get more involved!

## Professionalism for creators and publishers

Creators can re-situate themselves from 'hobby' to 'professional' - get agents, be professional, move beyond just making work and towards marketing and selling it. It has been widely noted that the teaching of creative arts in higher education often falls short in the area of professionalism/business skills. People are not taught how to keep accounts, invoice, market their work or communicate with clients. The survey showed that few people working in comics have any specific training at all - this, along with the fact that creators often work in relative isolation from each other, can leave them open to exploitation.

There have been several recent cases of exploitative practices coming to light in the comics world. In 2018 Tapas Media – host of the **Tapastic** webcomic platform were accused of taking advantage of inexperienced creators with unfavourable terms associated with their incubator program.

There was also widespread criticism of **Nobrow Press** on twitter after creators began to share information regarding some of their business practices (particularly contractual issues that were a cause for concern.) In an exciting development, the **Society of Authors** took action to audit them. Nobrow was asked to submit examples of their contracts and irregularities were found which meant that they could be investigated. They were required to re-write their contracts and release at least one creator who has been unhappily bound by one of these contracts.

This is an example of the kind of advocacy that can be achieved through organising. The SOA have a legal team and are members of the **European Writers Council** (a federation of 46 national organisations of professional writers and translators in 30 countries including the EU - <http://europeanwriterscouncil.eu>) so can work with artists' organisations in other countries too.

**A report into the Nobrow audit** will be published on the SOA's website by mid December 2020!

There are publishers (and events) whose business models are far better, valuing care, kindness, mutual support and collaboration above money & prestige. Nobrow was an example of where these values were out of balance. Even the standard practice whereby festivals charge the majority of exhibitors a table fee but also pay a small number of special guests to attend is starting to be questioned. Some festivals in America are trying to find ways to address this issue.

At the time of writing, the **Society of Authors** are putting together a series of six events in collaboration with the Cartoon Museum for creators to learn more about topics such as the business of writing, contracts, copyright, IP, negotiating etc. Events will be advertised through the Comic Creator's Network. The SOA have pointed out that many of these issues overlap with other artistic professions like illustration, writing etc, so there is huge potential to collaborate/cooperate/ share information across the different creative sectors. The first event is ***Staying in Character: How to Protect Yourself and Your Characters*** and will take place on Weds 9 December, 8-9pm. This event is free to attend, and subsequent events will be available for a small fee or free to SoA members.

### **What can we learn from other industries?**

The **Collective Impact Forum** (<https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org>) is all about how to make change happen. It aims to help people avoid the pitfall of seeing problems as unsurmountable, and discussing the issues but never making the next step to action.

There may be no need to reinvent the wheel... we should examine what assets already exist. Who are the people who might be able to contribute? What are achievable goals right now? It's also necessary to figure out funding, as most people aren't able to work on a voluntary basis. A first step could be an **ecosystem map**, to bridge the gaps across the disparate groups. Who is doing what and where already?

One interesting demographic revealed by the survey was that the comics community may be somewhat more balanced than other art forms in terms of diversity, so could we approach places like the **Arts Council** with that information, arguing that this is a reason for the comics industry to be encouraged to develop? Also **GDP** - is there a way to measure the cultural value of comics and how they impact other industries (podcasts/TV/ film?)

Universities increasingly seem to want to work with the creative industries, and some are working on improving employment conditions for creatives.

Film, TV and theatre are examples of creative industries that are organised and are able to raise huge funds to support the people working in them. There's the **Film and TV Charity** (<https://filmtvcharity.org.uk>) and also **Acting for Others** which is a charity that raises funds to support actors.

Funds are often raised from companies like the **BBC**, **Netflix** and **Channel 4**... might there be potential to approach companies like **Netflix**, **DC** and **Marvel** about contributing funding to organisations fostering comics talent?

Can we consult with other advocacy organisations to create a plan?

To stay updated on ongoing developments with this campaign, sign up to the newsletter here: <https://mailchi.mp/11b5b5fbc046/ukccs20>

## Resources/websites mentioned:

**The Association of Comic Creators** (currently a group on Discord - website to come. Join free of charge on Discord at <https://discord.gg/sKDrf8Q>)  
**The Association of Illustrators** (<https://theaoi.com>)  
**The Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society** (<https://www.alcs.co.uk>)  
**The Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society's *Authors' Earnings Research Report*** (<https://www.alcs.co.uk/news/authors-earnings-research-researchers-publish-full-report>)  
**The Collective Impact Forum** (<https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org>)  
**The Comics Creators Network** (<https://www2.societyofauthors.org/comics-creators-network/>)  
**Creator Resource** (<https://www.creatorresource.com/author/stephanie/>) - Stephanie Cooke's collection of resources for comic creators, including page rate surveys, marketing advice, legal information etc.  
**Positive Negatives** (<https://positivenegatives.org>)  
**The Royal Society of Literature** (<https://rsliterature.org>)  
**The Royal Society of Literature's *A Room of my Own Report 2019*** (<https://rsliterature.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/RSL-A-Room-of-My-Own-Report-19-June-2019.pdf>)  
**The Society of Authors** (<https://www2.societyofauthors.org>)  
**Thought Bubble Festival** (<https://www.thoughtbubblefestival.com>)  
**The UK Comic Creators Survey** (<http://hannahberry.co.uk/survey/>)  
**The UK comic creator survey newsletter** - for ongoing updates: <https://mailchi.mp/11b5b5fbc046/ukccs20>

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