

Studies in Comics
Volume 14 Number 1

© 2023 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/stic_00104_1

Received 4 May 2023; Accepted 4 October 2023; Published Online May 2024

GAËLLE KOVALIV
University of Lausanne

Internet, the *Paradise Lost* of comics? Observations on the constraints behind publishing webcomics, based on interviews with francophone authors

Keywords

digital comics
social networks
feminism
comics field

Abstract

Digital comics, especially when published online, such as on blogs or social media, are often associated with notions of freedom and unlimited possibilities and limits. This idea is widely shared in the media, and it is common to encounter headlines such as ‘Instagram, comics paradise?’ (Beaux-Arts Magazine), ‘comics have found a new Eldorado in Instagram’ (CNews), ‘comics are particularly well suited to

Delivered by Intellect to:

Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

Instagram's visual format' (Numéro) and 'what if Instagram is the network best suited for comics?' (Nouvel Obs). This idea is shared by the artists themselves, as it appears clearly in their speeches and self-representations. This contribution, based in part on more than thirty interviews with francophone digital cartoonists, aims to question this alleged 'total freedom'. First, it investigates the reasons for this common representation of a wider freedom associated with digital comics more than books, mainly due to the absence of editorial filters. Then, it shows how, instead, a significant number of filters apply that challenge the purported freedom of digital media. These filters are varied in nature and relate to very different issues, such as the difficulty of getting paid when distributing only online, which leads to the self-restriction of signing a contract with publishers or the need to establish partnerships with institutions; the website and platforms' general conditions of use; and simply the lack of time and material due to the absence of a sustainable economic structure, among other factors. Finally, the contribution focuses on the specific limitations imposed by social media, as many contemporary digital comics are posted on Instagram: the interface, terms of use and algorithm have massive effects on the content, style, drawings themselves and narrative construction.

authors
Instagram

Introduction

This article will deal with the constraints (some quite visible, some hidden) that regulate the publication of natively digital comics on the internet, focusing on francophone cases. It will discuss the constraints arising directly from the digital medium at large, then move progressively to consider those arising from publishing on specific platforms. To allow the argument to unfold, I have divided the field of investigation according to the types of constraints authors face: economic, legal, editorial, time and social. Although in some cases the boundary is clear, in other cases (most obviously, time), the constraints depend on a combination of factors and forces that influence one another, and need to be disentangled.

The analysis is informed by a corpus of interviews I conducted with 34 digital comics authors between September 2019 and January 2020.¹ The corpus is limited to francophone authors and, as such, focuses on clearly positioned experiences and traditions (Baroni et al. 2021). Although the internet is global and most of the platforms I discuss are not limited to francophone contexts – and thus many of the observations can be extended to other cultural areas of production – this study explores and builds on specific regions and case studies, and its findings make no claim to universality. The article does, nonetheless, open up for similar investigations dealing with different contexts and experiences, which are currently lacking and would help shed light on production practices in the field of digital comics.

1. The interviews I refer to are currently unpublished and have been collected by me privately. They constitute the corpus that guides the investigation of my current doctoral project, which studies the conditions of production and reception of French-speaking webcomics. I will refer to each individual interview citing the quotes or testimonies followed by a date in square brackets – e.g. [10 October 2019].

Delivered by Intellect to:
Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

The internet, freedom and the creation and circulation of digital comics

Several shared beliefs surround and govern the Internet. One of the most critical concerns its capacity to allow the dissemination of unconstrained information, unfettered opinions and unlimited creations. Many philosophers, scholars and jurists saw in the web the first concrete, actual materialization of the idea of freedom of expression (Lepage 2006: 140; Bayart 2009: 67; Cazeaux 2014: 104). The notion of artistic or cultural freedom of expression online is taken very seriously by international bodies and is part of the freedom of expression protected by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The concept has proper legal force: the European Court of Human Rights considers, for example, that freedom of expression, including artistic freedom, can take precedence over an individual's right to an image (Benedek and Ketterman 2014: 33).

These visions of the internet as a blank page on which it is possible to give free rein to an unconstrained creation were also sustained in the comics field. In 2000, Scott McCloud theorized that digital comics were based on what he called the 'infinite canvas', a medium full of promise for which everything, from aesthetics to narrative grammar, had yet to be invented. Following his article, several authors and researchers have taken an interest in this virgin territory, whose only boundaries seemed to be the technical skills and imagination of creators (Rageul 2014; Goodbrey 2017).

The freedom represented by the web concerns both form and content. In the first case, it sometimes takes an unexpected direction: the ludic dimension often does not point in the direction of elaborate narrative constructions based on hypertexts and non-linear architectures, but rather aims to have fun without having to abide by the constraints of a printed book. Boulet, who ran *bouletcorp*, one of the most famous French comics blogs, values his website as a place of 'the luxury of mediocrity' [10 October 2019], and Mélaka, one of the pioneers of the genre, adds:

It is obvious that my practice of comics on the Internet is the opposite of that of making an album that is going to be sold to a publisher! On the Internet, I allow myself to botch the drawing, jump from the written to the drawn, and include photos. I don't assign much importance to the form in reality, I am completely free.

[3 December 2019]

For some authors (two of those interviewed), the freedom offered by the Internet is reflected in the content of their productions. The absence of gatekeepers linked to traditional publishing structures has, in fact, allowed the emergence of comics – particularly in relation to activism and inclusivity, e.g., feminist ones – which would not have found their place within publishing houses before

Delivered by Intellect to:

Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

their popularity (and therefore their potential profitability) was demonstrated online (Reynes 2016; Kovaliv 2022a). Within my panel, Diglee and Thomas Mathieu are excellent examples of this opening up of the field and of what is possible.

However, while common sense and some success stories and optimistic claims may suggest that the internet is an El Dorado in which it is possible to create as one pleases, far from any external interference, it seems in reality that numerous constraints continue to apply to works, which attenuate the apparent freedom that we associate with the digital medium. These constraints take various forms and concern different issues: they condition what is published online, but also how one publishes, whether it be the form, the content or the visual representation.

Without aiming at being exhaustive, and based on the interview data gathered, I will present the most significant constraints that apply to those who publish online and to their productions.

Media constraints

The medium itself is a source of constraint. The digital mediation opens up a series of changes in comics' meaning making, sometimes unprecedentedly allowed and sometimes hindered by the affordance of their environment (Kovaliv and Stucky 2023; see also Wilde; Busi Rizzi and Di Paola, both featuring in this same issue). This may lead webcomics to move away from the prototypical idea of what a comic is (Busi Rizzi 2023).

But to remain within the field of (prototypical) comics, around three quarters of the authors from my interview panel limit or shy away from the use of animation or sound. For others, it remains crucial to respect non-digital notions such as sequentiality (McCloud 1993) or the co-presence of panels in the same visual space to obtain the tabular effect (Fresnault-Deruelle 1976). Such creators deem the inclusion of some tabular component fundamental, which impacts how they apprehend the digital material.

This implies that, for example, the Instagram interface will not be grasped in the same way, or even mobilized at all by some digital comics creators, depending on their degree of attachment to the persistence of a sort of minimal grid (Kovaliv and Stucky 2023). In fact, while some align the size and shape of their panels to the interface offered by the platform, others divide this 'slide' into several micro-panels; others still, more pragmatic, modify their practice according to their needs (Kovaliv 2022b).

In addition to this ideological limitation, there are the technical limits that condition comics production: over half of the authors I interviewed said that they had trained themselves and/or were limited by their technical knowledge. However, these limits will likely be less restrictive for the new generations, since more and more comics training courses are incorporating digital literacy in their course offerings.

Delivered by Intellect to:
Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)
IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

2. <https://collectionrvb.com/>, accessed 11 July 2023.

Economic constraints

Aiming for the book

Except for webtoon platforms or a few initiatives such as the RVB collection (a website publishing French-speaking interactive digital comics)², there are few, if any, opportunities to be paid directly when publishing comics online. Hence, many authors (seventeen from my panel but I discover new books driven from online productions almost every day) try to make their work profitable by having it published in print, such as Thomas Mathieu who states, while being asked if he gets money for his online production: ‘Yes, through the printed book’ [10 December 2019]. This bet often pays off, as publishers are willing to reissue comics published in blogs or Instagram accounts that already have a large readership, thus representing a pool of potential customers (Kovaliv 2022a). Guillaume Long, famous for his cooking comics blog *A boire et à manger*, like several bloggers who have emerged on the net, says in this regard that he conceives his online space as a place of pre-publication, in the manner of comic magazines in the era of the press, when titles such as *Spirou* or *Tintin* ruled the medium [28 October 2019]. Jibé, the author of the blog *Sans emploi*, affirms having a similar practice: he decided to work on the content and form of his online publications while already having in mind a potential paper publication, so that he wanted everything to be almost directly editable [20 November 2019].

This desire to offer, in the long term, a printed version of one’s webcomics may condition what is published and how the works are conceived, since the potentiality of moving to a different support will, from the beginning, influence how the artists choose to mobilize the possibility of interactivity or media enrichment (animations, sounds). The ambition to eventually publish one’s online production in print can be found in many cases, at least half of my representative panel. Thus, for authors for whom online publication is only a preliminary stage to publication in the book format, it is unnecessary to bother with these digital affordances, which are time-consuming to produce and complex to set up, and which will disappear once the work is published in a paper version.

Satisfying partners

In the absence of a stable economic model or open structures allowing online content to be published and directly remunerated, another solution for making money from digital creation is to find a funding source, perhaps through (public or private) partners, but it is quite rare: in my panel, it happened in only a couple of occasions, that are listed below. Although this idea often proves profitable, as the sums received are sometimes substantial, it nonetheless implies new constraints, as it involves delegating some power – the right to review and edit at the very least – which thus causes the authors to lose some of their creative freedom.

Delivered by Intellect to:

Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

This is what Emmanuel Espinasse, scriptwriter and illustrator of *You, Robot* (produced within the framework of the ERCcOMICS project), testifies to. Initiated by the European Commission, the project aimed to create webcomics based on research financed by European funds. Espinasse recounts how he had to revise his original ambition to meet the requirements of the financial partner. The people in charge of the project did not appreciate his first version at all, judging it to be too politically aligned and too critical of robotics research and development. His interpretation did not correspond to the project's objectives, since ERCcOMICS was primarily intended to give a positive image of the European research funding programme, aimed at a large audience. Therefore, the author was forced to rethink the project and propose a different reading of the work he had been asked to disseminate through his webcomic, circumscribing his scope. Nevertheless, once he avoided tackling topics deemed too divisive or criticizing the efforts of the European Union, he believes he was allowed a fairly wide margin of freedom on the other aspects, such as ethical choices or character development for example [14 November 2019].

It must be stressed that collaborations with institutional or private partners are not always carried out within such strict premises. Samuel Pott, one of the names behind the interactive documentary *Anne Franck au pays du Manga* – an interactive documentary by Alain Lewkowicz, Samuel Pott, Vincent Bourgeau and Marc Sainsauve that rewrites the story of Anne Frank in webcomic form – told me that he had been given almost total *carte blanche* by the Arte channel, which was financing the project. The only constraint he felt on his work was the demand for maximum interactivity and the largest possible use of multimedia tools, such as animation, hypertext links, sound effects and other complementary documents [16 January 2020]. This suggests that commissioners' wishes often leave authors with a great deal of creative freedom, but their requests frequently involve changes of some kind in terms of content, form and orientation of the work.

Managing time

As for the great majority of authors, who try to keep their complete creative freedom and do without external partners or funding, they are often caught up in time constraints. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to be remunerated for works published online, these works are often developed in limited time slots, arranged between paid projects. In these cases, it is easy to understand that authors do not have as much time as they would need to complete more ambitious digital projects.

Marion Montaigne explains that when she was contacted by the team of the online magazine *Professeur Cyclope*, she immediately wanted to make an interactive comic with multiple choices. But she soon realized that this would be too time-consuming for the time she could allot considering her remuneration. So, she had to 'cut back' her idea by reducing her working hours. The result was unsatisfactory, and she abandoned the project completely [5 November 2019].

Delivered by Intellect to:
Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)
IP: 188.61.3.244

3. In 2016, the États Généraux de la Bande Dessinée (EGBD) noted that:

In 2014, 53% of respondents had an income below the minimum gross annual growth wage, including 36% who were below the poverty line. If only women are considered, 67% have an income below the minimum gross annual growth wage and 50% are below the poverty line.

4. An analogous mechanism concerning Instagram will be discussed later in the article.

On a different level, the case of David Revoy sheds light on how time constraints are linked to economic issues. Like other authors, he lives thanks to the support of the subscribers who have chosen to subsidize him through a platform (Patreon, Tipee, Ko-fi or even PayPal) each time an episode of his web series *Pepper and Carrot* is released. Being supported by a large international community, Revoy earns almost €3000 per episode, which may seem substantial compared to the sums usually received by comic authors for an entire volume.³ However, this sum should be divided by the number of months required to produce each episode, since it is not a question of permanent, periodical funding but a sort of economic gratification from the party most mobilized to reward each release. At the time of our interview, Revoy was taking an average of two to three months to produce a single episode, which provided him with a small income. He admitted that this was causing him to think about changing his practice, shortening his releases to publish more regularly and be paid more often⁴ [1 November 2019]. Whether or not this reflection was eventually put into practice, it nevertheless influenced his activity as an author.

Time constraints are a constitutive part of the cartoonists' work, not only in serial comics, and are in direct descent from economic ones. Comics creators (and those in other arts) who choose to free their production from the established mechanisms of late-capitalist remuneration have but two options: turn their works into pet projects, and produce in the scraps of time left to them by what becomes their primary job, or tie their production to forms of direct remuneration and neo-patronage through funding platforms. Yet this way also ties them inseparably to the need to release their work at regular intervals and as close together as possible, so as not to lose readership and secure each issue's profit.

Legal constraints

It can also be considered that the injunctions or limitations arising from the terms of use of social media platforms (Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, etc.) and online application stores (App Store, Google Play, etc.) impose on digital comics constraints that can be described as 'legal'. These entities play, in fact, a prescriptive role by setting unsurpassable rules. If creators want their productions to be read – or to be visible enough – through these platforms and apps, they have no choice but to submit to these regulations and restrict their creative freedom, since it is, as we know, impossible to negotiate with the leading tech companies or their representatives – particularly so when dealing with sensitive topics (Lydiat 2021; Pilipets and Paasonen 2022).

There are many examples, such as *MediaEntity* by Simon Kansara and Emilie Tarascou (2012–18). This work of fiction, the longest to have used the Turbomedia format, imagined a world in which our digital avatars became autonomous to the point of turning into independent entities, free of all control. To maximize the immersivity and expand the narrative experience, the authors created

Delivered by Intellect to:

Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

Facebook accounts for their characters, accounts on which they broadcasted additional information, surveys and games for the most fans. This playful dimension was an organic part of their fictional and artistic project. Through this, the authors had planned to broadcast several messages in Morse code, as if one of the protagonists was calling for help. However, this intention came up against the rules of Facebook, which refuses to subsidize publications with too many special characters, for fear of seeing coded messages spread. The two authors therefore had to review their strategy and part of their project. These reflections also led them to create their own proprietary website featuring their comic,⁵ so as not to be 'entirely dependent on the fluctuating conditions of the App Store' on which *MediaEntity* is also distributed as a downloadable application [19 December 2019].

These legal constraints can also take a more insidious turn. Social networks are notorious for their reluctance to deal with nudity and sexuality. In the absence of explicit rules and a clear tolerance policy, several of the artists interviewed thus practice a form of self-censorship while conceiving their works, to avoid the potentially painful consequences of having their accounts suspended for violating the terms of service (ToS). Marie Spénale, cartoonist of the *Été* (2017–19) series on Instagram, comments in this respect:

There are lots of nipples in *Été*. At first, I also thought it was taboo, and I looked for many ways around it, so I did a lot of self-censorship initially, but the producers encouraged me to be explicit instead. What we noticed was simply that you can't subsidise a publication that contains nudity.

[16 December 2019]

It is therefore hard to determine what is truly a constraint the networks impose and what belongs to mere beliefs and preventive action. In any case, it should be noted that the ToS possess a strong prescriptive effect, directing content production towards topics that authors, according to their sensibilities, consider safe enough not to be restricted by the platform where they publish.

Editorial constraints

Although the majority of interviewed authors work on self-managed platforms, some structures aimed at professionalizing the work of natively digital comics authors also offer little freedom in terms of format. Webtoon platforms, such as Webtoon Factory, Webtoon, Verytoon, Delitoon, Allskreenz (among others), unlike the publishing structures beyond print comics, require extremely restrictive formatting, concerning both form and narrative.⁶ The economic model, which most of the time is based on episodes being sold individually, requires a very rigorous segmentation of the works and imposes a calibration of the size of each issue, since the prices are identical for all episodes.

5. <http://www.mediaentity.net/fr/>, accessed 11 July 2023.
6. Of course, there are exceptions to the major freedom that print comics usually allow in formatting. The case of the Franco-Belgian serial album (48 CC) is an excellent counterexample: for decades (1940–70), most series were published under the same editorial format, an album with a hard cover and a strict limit of 48 pages.

Delivered by Intellect to:
Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)
IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

7. This is the case for Webtoon Factory, Webtoon, Piccoma and Verytoon, but curiously not for Delitoon.

Anne Masse, the author of the series *Azalais* (broadcasted on Webtoon Factory in 2019), looks back on the editorial adventure of her work:

My *Azalais* project was not initially planned for digital, nor in the serial form. I had to adapt it for Webtoon Factory, adding, for example, a *cliffhanger* every 60 panels. It wasn't too difficult to comply with these requirements because I had the synopsis in my head, but I hadn't created everything yet. Nevertheless, sometimes it was harder, I really had to rack my brains to stretch the episodes to reach their calibration.

[8 January 2020]

Similarly, Kotopopi complains about the rigidity of the interface and the formal device. She would have liked to add clickable zones as variations interrupting the sole vertical scrolling mode, but she had to face a clear refusal by the editorial boards in charge of the platform she was publishing on [22 October 2019].

In addition to these formal constraints, there are, maybe more interestingly, some narrative considerations. Webtoon production is also quite standardized from a narrative point of view, since the series offered on the various platforms fit into a limited number of very specific narrative genres. Almost all the interfaces offering content in French⁷ indeed allow readers to choose by employing a similar classification, which testifies to its central role. Romance and drama are at the top of the ranking, generally including a dozen categories per platform. As a result, series that do not fit into one of the predefined categories struggle to find their place on these platforms. For example, *Azalais* did not have a second season because the Webtoon Factory editors, Anne Masse told me 'were not thrilled with the fact that it was a very contemplative series'. The author had to 'fight a lot so that nothing happened in certain episodes', which did not correspond to the platform's intention and vision [8 January 2020].

The editorial policies of webcomics, therefore, can condition their direction and style significantly. Although this is not a new mechanism – on the contrary, if anything, it is a constant in the editorial field – this kind of conditioning conflicts with the idea of the internet as a place of absolute freedom from a creative point of view.

Social constraints

In addition to material constraints, the production of digital comics is subject to several less explicit social constraints. Indeed, belonging to any social group implies recognizing a certain number of norms governing what is acceptable, transgressive or controversial, and the one in which digital comic authors operate is no exception. Moreover, in addition to the implicit and explicit rules shared

Delivered by Intellect to:

Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

by a group, there are standards, beliefs and preferences specific to each individual, because of their personal history and sensibility.

For example, Diglee talked about her fear of talking about politics, especially feminism, at a time when these issues were still not very much on the agenda of the comics blog culture at its beginning, which mainly consisted of recounting small autobiographical anecdotes. She saw these themes as a kind of taboo. Indeed, as her blog was public and attracted a large readership – hence being a space of disintermediated interaction (Skains 2019) – she did not control her audience. Consequently, she was afraid of being harassed online for tackling such topics. Therefore, she chose to limit herself to the comedy genre for a long time, to avoid getting into confrontational situations [19 November 2019].

This self-censorship on subjects that make people angry is frequently found in the discourse of comics creators. Several artists, and particularly women authors (Borel and Spornot 2020), display this double desire to censor themselves and shy away from any potentially delicate or controversial theme so as not to offend the sensibilities of readers but also with the explicit aim of avoiding *shitstorms*, the outbursts of criticism on the web that take on unmanageable proportions. Kotopopi reveals: ‘On days when I don’t have the strength to face hostile hordes, I will make sure to post publications with more “neutral” content’ [22 October 2019], i.e., stories that are not likely, a priori, to provoke debate or malicious reactions. For some authors, there are also red lines that should never be crossed, as attested by Marion Montaigne, who affirms she resolutely refrains from tackling certain subjects, such as animal experimentation, for example [5 November 2019].

However, the fact of having to deal with public feedback is sometimes seen in a more positive light. For instance, in my panel of interviews, comments of this type came across half of the time. As Guillaume Long suggests, his fellow authors are often happy to have immediate feedback and to be immediately valued through positive comments, shares and *likes*, whereas in the case of the production of print comics, this feedback only comes months after the end of the author’s work and only in rare and precise conditions (book signings, conventions, etc.) [28 October 2019]. Beyond the simple gratification, the enthusiastic reactions sometimes allow the authors to modulate their production: the constraint hence becomes an opportunity. For example, Esquimau Pêche and Mega Elod, creators of the Instagram miniseries *Recette de Magie* (2019–20), changed the narrative along the way following feedback from their audience.⁸ Readers had enthusiastically reacted to one of the characters, Justin Groscaillou, when he appeared in one of the first episodes. He was initially not meant to return, but he generated so many passionate comments that the authors chose to make him a recurring character with multiple reappearances [4 November 2019].

Social constraints are somewhat more elusive, as they are not only grounded in the sociocultural coordinates of a given geographical context, the audience to which one refers, and the practices that are allowed and rewarded by specific platforms. Instead, they also involve the interpretation and

8. <https://www.instagram.com/recettesdemagie/>, accessed 11 July 2023.

reaction, necessarily subjective, that each artist affixes to this feedback. The disintermediated nature of the web (Skains 2019; Antonini et al. 2020) means that authors must manage the labour and emotional burden that the process implies by themselves. Authors may insist on, or refrain from, tackling a certain subject in response (or in opposition) to the comments they receive, but they may also choose to minimize the very occasions when this confrontation may occur.

The specific constraints of Instagram

Perceived by mainstream media as the most favourable place for the free distribution of natively digital comics (Kovaliv 2022b), Instagram is now relied on by many authors, who appreciate its simplicity of use, the free interface, the large number of potential readers and the absence of editorial mediations likely to intervene directly on the content or form. This last advantage often proves to be an illusion, since the platform's affordances and policies largely intervene in shaping the artists' outputs, determining both their content and design.

More than 100 million images are uploaded daily to the platform, and their availability and visibility for the users is governed by an algorithm whose operating mechanisms are kept jealously secret by Meta. Nevertheless, through trial and error and empirical experimentation, authors noticed that certain behaviours and types of content are rewarded, and accounts that align with them are more systematically foregrounded (see Cotter 2019). Instagram will, for example, favour creators who publish regularly, which has a concrete impact on production, since it encourages authors to publish numerous small fragments and short posts rather than larger content, which takes longer to produce and is therefore less profitable for the creators. The network also values posts that generate reactions such as sharing, likes and registrations; artists will consequently be encouraged to adapt their content to generate empathy and shares (Cotter 2019).

To this 'carrot', which pushes creators to adopt uniform behaviours to obtain gratification from the network, is added a 'stick': if these rules are not applied, the consequence is not a simple absence of prominence, but an actual withdrawal, an invisibilization. Instagram goes even further in its punitive measures, since the platform condemns certain types of content and applies retaliatory measures that sometimes go as far as shadowbans (the impossibility of being seen other than through a search, even by one's own subscribers) or the pure and simple deletion of certain accounts. The exhaustive list of non-tolerated content has never been made public, but during my research I have interviewed three authors and witnessed at least five other cases who have seen their comics about abortion, female masturbation, poo, or, more surprisingly, dyslexia disappear, leaving them complaining about the action of the social media behind these removals.

The massive number of daily publications has another impact on the works produced. Competing with millions of images, caught up in a perpetual flow, comics series are rarely read (if at all) by

Delivered by Intellect to:

Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

readers in the order desired by the authors. Subscribers will find it difficult to follow a series whose episodes are constructed with a strong narrative link, which impacts the way of thinking and structuring stories. Thomas Cadène explains that the two serials he scripted, *Les Autres Gens (LAG)*, broadcast on its site, and *Été*, published on Instagram, had radically different writing logics, eminently linked to their publishing space:

For *LAG*, the cliffhanger was almost compulsory at the end of each episode; it was a writing constraint, and it ensured the continuation of the reading. It was sometimes obvious that we just wanted a cliffhanger no matter what. [...] *Été* is different, as the audience is more volatile, the episodes are more autoconclusive, so it looks more like a succession of short stories.

[5 November 2019]

On Instagram, French-speaking comics accounts mainly publish short anecdotes, as the platform does not allow more than ten slides per post. Moreover, the link between these anecdotes is often rather loose, as linear reading is not guaranteed. When building a truly horizontal narrative, you need instead to bring out the heavy artillery: dramatic cliffhangers and metatextual support, to encourage readers to move away from the 'natural' scrolling of the interface and look for the following or previous episodes.

The visual interface, tailor-made to be read on smartphones, also plays a constraining role due to the small size of the image, which has a particular effect on the aesthetics of the publications. In the absence of a satisfactory zoom function, comics published on Instagram thus end up acquiring some common features: in addition to similar framing (portraits or shots cut to size), the drawings are often quite simple, with few backgrounds, shadows or textures, the texts are often brief, and the colouring is mainly done in solids. The different graphic styles of the cartoonists thus correspond, for the most part, to the *instagramism* defined by Lev Manovich (Kovaliv 2022b).

Coda

If, like Mirion Malle [27 March 2018] and several other authors, we can indeed deplore the standardization of online comics, especially on social networks, we can nevertheless rejoice in the diversity that continues to exist in the margins of freedom allowed by the web, especially in terms of content, because we are witnessing a diversification of themes tackled that was rarely seen before. Having rested for a long time in the hands of a very closed boys' club, the field of comics is now more open than ever to LGBTQ+, anti-speciesist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and feminist productions and artists: all categories that were seldom mentioned before. Those issues have always existed in comics production, but they were often confined to alternative/underground circuits with less visibility and reach, while the Internet opens them up to a potentially limitless audience worldwide.

Delivered by Intellect to:

Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

On: Mon, 13 May 2024 07:17:37

Moreover, there have always been in comics history strong standards and periods in which production tended to be similar. The works of the Brussels or Marcinelle schools, to stick to the francophone case, were not defined by great aesthetic or narrative diversity. In fact, comics have always found ways to be creative in rather constraining formal contexts. Constraints can be a source of creativity for those who can play with them to find innovative solutions.

Despite the conspicuous changes to the traditionally established practices in the editorial field, when concerning comics creation, the web offers as many opportunities and advantages as imperfections and shortcomings. Neither paradise nor purgatory, at a closer look, the internet simply seems like an earthly place like any other.

Acknowledgements

This article's publication was made possible thanks to the translation and invaluable work provided by Giorgio Busi Rizzi, benefitting from an FWO (Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen, Research Foundation – Flanders) senior postdoctoral fellowship (1284024N).

Funding

This article was produced as part of the Sinergia project *Reconfiguring Comics in our Digital Era*, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF: CRSII5_180359).

References

- Antonini, Alessio, Brooker, Sam and Benatti, Francesca (2020), 'Circuits, cycles, configurations: An interaction model of web comics', in A.-G. Bossier, D. E. Millard and C. Hargood (eds), *Interactive Storytelling: 13th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling, ICIDS 2020*, Bournemouth, UK, 3–6 November 2020, Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 287–99.
- Baroni, Raphaël, Kovaliv, Gaëlle and Stucky, Olivier (2021), 'La transition numérique de la bande dessinée franco-belge, une mutation impossible?', *Belphégor: Littérature populaire et culture médiatique*, <https://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/3948>. Accessed 11 July 2023.
- Bayart, Benjamin (2009), 'La neutralité du réseau', in Collectif (ed.), *La Bataille Hadopi*, Cergy-Pontoise: InLibroVeritas, pp. 65–75.
- Benedek, Wolfgang and Kettemann, Matthias C. (2014), *Freedom of Expression and the Internet*, Strasbourg: Éditions du Conseil de l'Europe.
- Borel, Pascale and Soparnot, Richard (2020), 'De l'autocensure professionnelle ou quand les femmes sont prétendues responsables des inégalités qu'elles subissent', *RIMHE: Revue Interdisciplinaire Management, Homme & Entreprise*, 9:40, pp. 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rimhe.040.0068>. Accessed 20 September 2023.

Delivered by Intellect to:

Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)

IP: 188.61.3.244

- Busi Rizzi, Giorgio (2023), 'Digital comics: An old/new form', in M. Ahmed (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Comics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 102–21.
- Cazeaux, Guillaume (2014), *Odyssée 2.0: La démocratie dans la civilisation numérique*, Paris: Armand Colin.
- Cotter, Kelley (2019), 'Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram', *New Media & Society*, 21:4, pp. 895–913.
- Fresnault-Deruelle, Pierre (1976), 'Du linéaire au tabulaire', *Communications*, 24:1, pp. 7–23.
- Goodbrey, Daniel Merlin (2017), 'The impact of digital mediation and hybridisation on the form of comics', Ph.D. thesis, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire.
- Kovaliv, Gaëlle (2022a), 'Comment la bande dessinée nativement numérique influence le champ de la bande dessinée papier', *Comicalités*, Special Issue: 'Ce que le numérique fait à la bande dessinée', <https://doi.org/10.4000/comicalites.7678>. Accessed 11 July 2023.
- Kovaliv, Gaëlle (2022b), 'La bande dessinée sur les réseaux sociaux', *Neuvième Art*, <https://www.citebd.org/neuvieme-art/la-bande-dessinee-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux>. Accessed 11 July 2023.
- Kovaliv, Gaëlle and Stucky, Olivier (2023), 'La planche de bande dessinée à l'épreuve du numérique', *Sociétés & Représentations*, 75:1, pp. 147–62.
- Lepage, Agathe (2006), *L'opinion numérique*, Paris: Dalloz.
- Lydiate, Henry (2021), 'Censorship: Don't delete art', *Art Monthly*, 445: April, p. 46.
- McCloud, Scott (1993), *Understanding Comics*, Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink.
- McCloud, Scott (2000), *Reinventing Comics*, New York: Paradox Press.
- Pilipets, Elena and Paasonen, Susanna (2022), 'Nipples, memes, and algorithmic failure: NSFW critique of Tumblr censorship', *New Media & Society*, 24:6, pp. 1459–80.
- Rageul, Anthony (2014), 'La bande dessinée saisie par le numérique: Formes et enjeux du récit reconstruit par l'interactivité', Ph.D. thesis, Rennes: Université de Rennes 2.
- Reyns-Chikuma, Chris (2016), 'De Bécassine à Yoko Tsuno: Entre stéréotypes, oublis et renaissances', *Alternative Francophone*, 9:1, pp. 155–70, <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/af/index.php/af/article/view/27279/pdf>. Accessed 11 July 2023.
- Skains, R. Lyle (2019), *Digital Authorship: Publishing in the Attention Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Suggested citation

Kovaliv, Gaëlle (2023), 'Internet, the *Paradise Lost* of comics? Observations on the constraints behind publishing webcomics, based on interviews with francophone authors', *Studies in Comics*, Special Issue: 'Comics Strike Back! Digital Forms, Digital Practices, Digital Audiences', 14:1, pp. 121–35, https://doi.org/10.1386/stic_00104_1

Delivered by Intellect to:
Gaëlle Kovaliv (33345285)
IP: 188.61.3.244

Contributor details

Gaëlle Kovaliv has a degree in modern French and language sciences from the University of Lausanne. She has worked in the publishing world, notably at Impressions Nouvelles. She is currently working on a thesis between sociology and literature, on the conditions of production and reception of French-speaking digital comics, as part of the project 'Reconfiguring Comics in our Digital Era', under the direction of Professor Raphaël Baroni. She directs the 'Comics and social networks' dossier for the online platform *Neuvième art* and co-directs the thematic dossier 'What the digital world does to comics' for *Comicalités*. She is also co-editor of *Comicalités*, alongside Benoît Crucifix. Finally, she is the co-director of BDFIL, the comics festival in Lausanne.

Contact: Université de Lausanne, Bureau 5144, Anthropole, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland.

E-mail: gaelle.kovaliv@unil.ch

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7935-0729>

Gaëlle Kovaliv has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
