

Policy Brief

Comics in the time of COVID-19: Tracking data on web-based comics and evaluating their potential for communicating public health messages

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KEY INFO

Research question: What are the potentials and challenges of producing and circulating time-sensitive public health messages via the comics medium across social media platforms?

Policy area or themes:

- Guidance, Messaging and Behaviour Change
- Creative Industries
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Methods: data-scraping n=15,000, quantitative and qualitative content analysis, comments analysis

Geographical area: Global, but in English-language

Research stage: Completed

Summary of the research

Our pandemic lives are deeply entwined with visual, web-based public health messages, from instructional hand-washing pictograms to infographics about R numbers. Alongside these official public health communications, people have created thousands of web-based comics conveying public health messages. In 2021 a Bournemouth University-based research team collected a sample of over 15,000 'COVID comics' posted and shared over Instagram between January 2020 and March 2021. We then coded our sample of comics to explore how the medium was used to shape and share public health messages. Insights from our analysis re-veal how comics can work to help governments and health professionals reach wider audiences, humanise public health messages and challenge infodemics online.

The research team consisted of Professor Anna Feigenbaum, PI; Dr. José Blázquez, CI and technical lead; Professor Julian McDougall, CI and expert in media literacies; Dr. Sam Goodman and Dr. William Proctor. As well as BU MA student and alumni research assistants: Conor Byrne, Ozlem Demirkol Tonnesen, Shannon McDavitt, Kufre Okon, Jonathan Sexton and project partners Comics Grid, Graphic Medicine Collective, Information Literacy Network and Public Health Dorset.

Policy recommendations

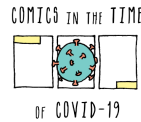
1. Best practice in public health messaging should combine visual storytelling and referencing techniques that acknowledge the existing literacy practices of their audiences.

2. Communities of practice should be further developed to enhance creative, evidence-based communications on social media. This includes bringing visual metaphor and internal emotional worlds into the visual communication of scientific and statistical reporting, as well as training in data referencing and social media optimisation skills.
3. Public Health bodies should work with comics artists on the creation and distribution of public health messaging campaigns. These collaborations are often most successful when artists can tap into their existing reader networks and retain ownership over their creative work.
4. Social Media platform regulation should focus not only on suppressing and flagging dis/misinformation, but also on helping to tag and amplify evidence-based posts. For example, a “green tick”, similar to the “blue tick” already used for verified public figures, could be used to verify the credibility of science communicators.
5. Platform regulation should be combined with strategies to strengthen people’s resilience to health misinformation through digital literacy, taking the transferable principles from how comics combine accessibility, relatability and interactivity to support the conversion of existing digital literacies into information capabilities.
6. More work at policy level needs to be done to achieve free access to social media data for researchers. Corporations like Facebook (now Meta) intentionally limit our ability to study social phenomena and preserve digital cultural heritage.

Key findings

- Comics can provide a platform to visualise and prioritise mental health, reaching people through emotional storytelling.
- Comics can tackle issues of health equity and foster empathy by humanising illness and health experiences.
- On social media, colour makes for more engagement and can be used to promote inclusivity and better target specific demographics.
- Visual metaphors can help build health literacy-particularly around complex scientific concepts that are difficult to visualise.
- Source referencing is key for improving evidence-based comics and creating verified ‘influencer networks’ of trusted social media health and science communicators.
- Hashtags can widen and diversify audiences, allowing messages to better target communities prone to misinformation.
- Digital optimisation can help drive engagement with public health messages on social media.
- Artists are navigating algorithmic constraints as Instagram flags and suppresses all COVID-19 material for misinformation.
- Interactive web comics can foster participatory culture in online health messaging, promoting resource sharing and wellness.
- Communicating uncertainty in comics can help cultivate information literacy, wellbeing, and resilience.

Further information



Project website <https://www.covidcomics.org/ahrc-project/>

Project database <https://www.covidcomics.org/ahrc-project/project-database/>

Project best practice guide <https://www.covidcomics.org/ahrc-project/best-practice-guidelines/>

Final Report (will be up on website soon – temporary link) https://livebournemouthac-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/afeigenbaum_bournemouth_ac_uk/ESI3zn7ynMJArePvRd7kOk0BG0wAhqIZ-I_yWoFnLLyHsA?e=JYVjCI

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