THE COMICS CULTURAL IMPACT COLLECTIVE

Community Interest Company
15346023

COMMUNITY

STAKEHOLDER

ROUNDTABLE REPORT #2

October 2024

Bold ideas for change in

the UK Comics Community

Who are we?

The Comics Cultural Impact Collective (CCIC) was founded in April 2023 with the aim of raising awareness of the cultural potential of comics in the UK. By working to improve comics infrastructure, funding and industry, we want to cultivate better opportunities and recognition for our artform.

CCIC is a Community Interest Company (15346023), led by an independent group of professionals within the UK comics community. Between us we have extensive experience in change-making and activism in arts, heritage and science.

In 2023, we launched with research into the diverse audiences and untapped sales potential of the comics form in publishing[1]; and with data to show the inequity between public funding given to comics compared to other artforms[2]. We continue to do this research as our goals are underpinned by data and evidence.

Now we want to gain a greater understanding of what our vibrant and multi-faceted community considers to be the main priorities for improving the comics landscape in the UK. Insights gathered from every part of the comics industry will help us set our direction.

You can find our website at
thecomicsculturalimpactcollective.org

[1] The Power of Comics, The Bookseller, 15/9/23
[2] Research by CCIC 2023

ROUNDTABLE EVENT

On 7 May 2024, CCIC ran the second of two online roundtable consultations with just shy of 100 attendees from across the comics community.

In the first roundtable in January, thoughts had been gathered around the major challenges and obstacles for comics in the UK, along with ideas about opportunities for overcoming them.

In this follow-up meeting, the aim was to start identifying how to progress. Where there is enthusiasm for taking an idea forward, CCIC is happy to act as a convening matchmaker, putting people together to either start work or to apply for the funding that will enable them to tackle bigger projects.

The meeting split into 5 rooms:

ROOM 1: COMICS IN EDUCATION

ROOM 2: COMICS PUBLISHING

ROOM 3: COMICS AS COMMUNICATION

ROOM 4: SUPPORT FOR COMIC CREATORS

ROOM 5: SUPPORT FOR COMICS ORGANISATIONS AND INFRASTUCTURE

This report will summarise the conversation in each room, highlighting positive examples that might be replicated or built upon, listing specific challenges and obstacles, and identifying potential opportunities for action.

Following the discussion, attendees were asked to complete a form detailing any projects currently underway, and where respondents are interested in connecting with potential collaborators we have included their information below.

ROOM 1:
COMICS IN EDUCATION

"Comics are an amazing literacy aid. It's so easy to get kids to read them with great enthusiasm."

Convenor: Zara Slattery

There were comics creators, workshop leads, university lecturers and a representative from an arts charity in this room, and the discussion covered the use of comics in education from Key Stage 1 through to Higher Education and informal learning.

COMICS IN EDUCATION:

Positive examples of comics in education:

- <u>The Blast programme</u> in Cork is supported by Creative Ireland. Creative workshops - including comics arts - are delivered as part of a five-year, nationally funded initiative, and are tailored to the needs of the school and their class subjects.

- At UCL, trainee teachers on the Primary PGCE programme learn how to use comics in the classroom. They have an extensive library of graphic novels and comics available for students at the university, although manga is not as well represented as it could be. Two of the trainers are currently applying for funding to run a children's comics and zine fair (7 - 14yrs) in 2025 alongside the South London Comics and Zine Festival.

- Kevin Hoffin, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Birmingham City University regularly uses comics on his course (see below).

- LICAF has shared <u>classroom resources</u> on the use of comics to enhance children's learning across a range of subjects/curriculum areas.

- Artists shared their positive experiences of working with schools, delivering comics workshops. They had good relationships with individual schools and teachers.

COMICS IN EDUCATION:

## Challenges and areas for improvement:

- There are issues for some KS2 comics related programmes getting access to schools and teachers

- There is still a lot of work to be done to convince teachers of the use of comics in the classroom despite evidence of their benefits. A representative from the charity Read for Good talked about their programmes, the cost of graphic novels and the lack of budgets hindering school libraries and access to books.

- There was a suggestion that workshops in visual literacy would be useful in continuing interest in comics beyond the primary level. These would enhance KS3 pupils' ability to express themselves and relate to comics.

COMICS IN EDUCATION:

POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- The creation of 'comics readers' for Higher Education illustration/comics art students, similar to English readers.

- Approaching publishers to ask them to make a percentage (e.g. 5%) of their comic books photocopiable for educational purposes.

- Attend educational conferences to promote and share the wealth of resources for using comics in the classroom.

- Start a dialogue with the Department of Education about the creation of resources for teachers on the potential of comics in the classroom; visual literacy and free drawing practices for KS3 learners.
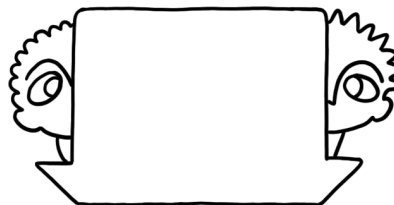
COMICS IN EDUCATION:

Get involved:

- Kevin Hoffin at Birmingham City University is conducting his doctoral research in Educomix: towards a Higher Education-ready, critical pedagogy of comics. He has written a pilot study to synthesise a comics-based pedagogy for use in multi-disciplinary HE that can be used by all staff and students regardless of familiarity with the medium, and will be running workshops to gauge effectiveness. To find out more about his research and potentially contribute, email kevin.Hoffin@BCU.ac.uk

- Read for Good is a national charity that inspires children to develop a life-changing love of reading. They believe passionately that any type of reading that a child chooses should be valued, free of judgement. Their programmes encourage children and young people to read anything and everything, from comics to classics. They have an ongoing partnership with Phoenix Comics. If you can support their work, contact them through their website - readforgood.org/contact-us/
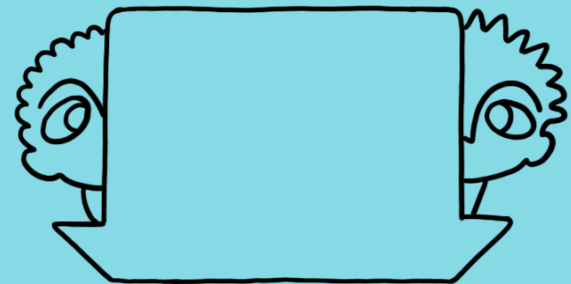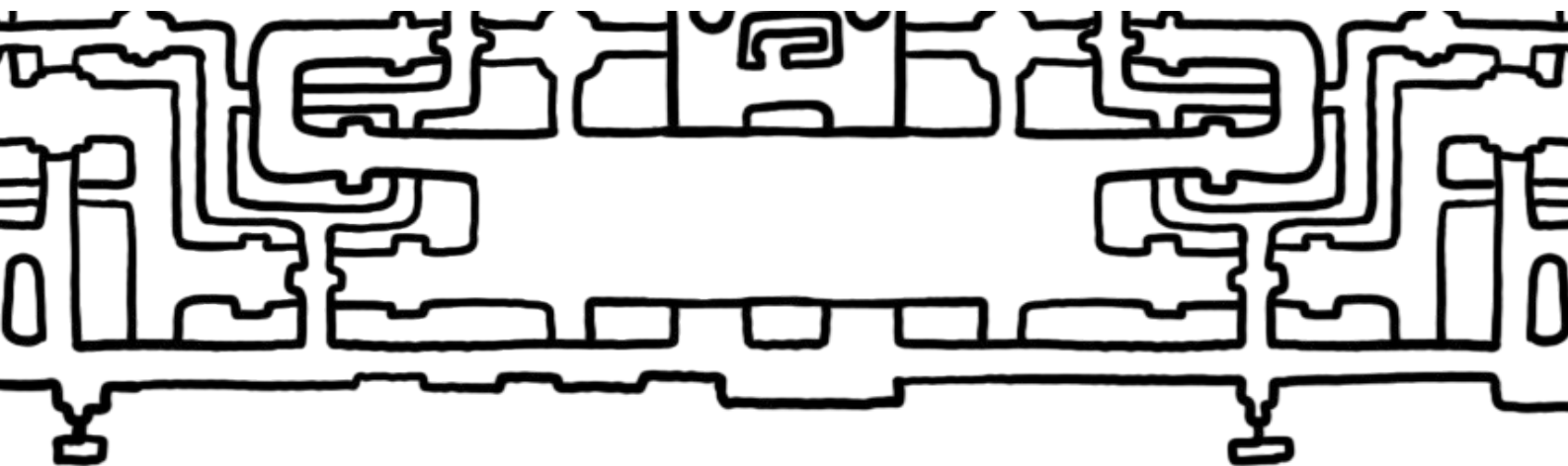
ROOM 2:
COMICS PUBLISHING

Convenor: Hannah Berry

Attendees represented publishers, consultancy, booksellers, reading groups, and included several published creators (both traditional & self published).

"We know the talent is there, and we know the appetite is there from readers, so what's the issue in the middle?"

POSITIVE EXAMPLES WITHIN COMICS PUBLISHING:

- The comics publishing industry is largely held up by smaller, independent publishers who are truly passionate about the medium and are taking on a disproportionate amount of risk. Their continued existence is vital to the comics ecosystem.

- David Fickling Books have now sold over 1 million copies of Jamie Smart's BUNNY VS MONKEY titles.

- Ivanka Hahnenberger has successfully persuaded London Book Fair to hold a comics pavilion in 2025, in order to not just sell rights but to help construct the UK market.

- Gabi Putnoki brings her Graphic Novel Reading Room to arts & literary events around the country, exposing more potential readers to the variety of comics available (see 'get involved' below)
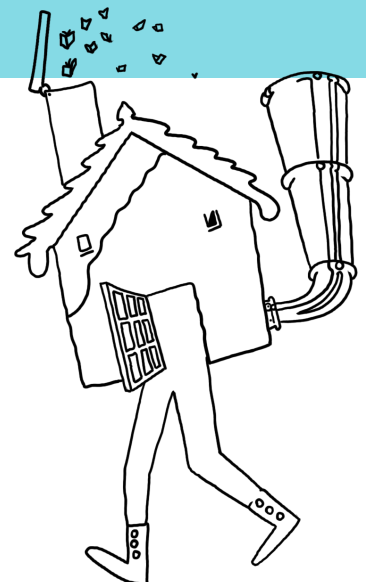
COMICS PUBLISHING:

CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

- For publishers producing GNs, initial investment is too high and any returns take a long time to recoup, making it unattractive to publishers who don't have a specific interest in furthering the medium itself and/or are financially unstable.

- Comics publishers need to punch above their weight in order to make headway in a largely indifferent/hostile industry while also staying small enough to have manageable overheads. Without a tearaway success (eg BUNNY VS MONKEY) there's no way for smaller publishers to grow.

- There's a gap (metaphorical and often physical) between the hugely successful kids GNs stocked by most booksellers and titles for older readers, because the pathways from one to the other are not clear. This may explain why so many avid comics readers from middle school onwards are reading Manga: it is extremely visible and titles are plentiful.

- There's a bottleneck between comics creators/publishers and comics readers: booksellers don't really know how to buy comics. Gardners (UK's largest books wholesaler) list all the hundreds of comics available in the UK, but most bookshops only carry a handful. Gardners also list by popularity, so the most popular/bestselling stay at the top with a long tail of midlist/indie titles.

- HEARTSTOPPER has been wildly successful: why is no one taking advantage of this success? Where are all the similar titles? (BREAKS would be a good follow-on - will be interesting to see if it's signposted as such)

- Comics are as diverse as the people who create them, but bookshops seem to focus on diverse groups solely as a stunt for specific months rather than as part of business as usual.

- The whole process of publishing comics (especially as a work-for-hire creator) is very opaque compared to traditional publishing, making it hard to know how to take advantage of any opportunities/ avoid pitfalls.

POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- Encourage Waterstones and other booksellers to better direct younger comics readers to new titles as they grow and seek more age-appropriate content to ensure they don't simply age out of comics altogether

- Form a network in order to bring together comics enthusiasts/advocates working in bookshops in order to share knowledge e.g.recommendations of trad- & self-published titles, tips for hard-to-source items, discussion points for book groups etc

- Whether we like it or not this is an industry that thrives on celebrity, and we should use successful, carefully selected comics authors and high profile comics fans more as ambassadors.

- Several high-profile studies such as the one by the National Literacy Trust have highlighted that while reading levels are falling overall, the one area that is consistently increasing the literacy, enjoyment and creativity of its readers is comics, and we should be sharing this proof with every available publishing business and org.

- While Free Comic Book Day exists to support comics retailers, expanding this to a National Comics Day would help bring the industry together and spotlight what the medium has to offer to a wider audience.

- Encourage arts and literature festivals to include comics and graphic novels in their general programming in order to introduce more potential readers to the medium.

Get involved:

- Gabi Putnoki brings her pop-up <u>Graphic Novel Reading Room</u> to literary, arts and science festivals to expose new audiences to comics. She has had some successes, but it can be tough to get a foot in the door. If you think you might be up for the challenge, especially if you've had some experience with - or have contacts in - arts and literary festivals, you can contact Gabi at gabi@graphicnovelreadingroom.com

COMICS AS COMMUNICATION

"*Researchers have funding and want to connect with a wider audience. Comic artists have the tools to do this. How do we nurture these collaborations?*"

Convenor: Karrie Fransman

Despite room 3 covering any industry that uses communication, from film to health education, attendees were predominantly from an academic and research background. The group consisted of academics, students and artists who had worked with researchers.

COMICS AS COMMUNICATION

POSITIVE EXAMPLES WITHIN COMICS PUBLISHING :

- There was a positive and excited feeling in the group for the potential for comics creators to work alongside researchers from all disciplines to amplify their data, strong evidence of the effectiveness of projects like these and ample funding opportunities for this work. Three comics creators, who have collaborated many times with academics and have evidence of the success of these kinds of collaborations, shared those experiences.

- There were many positive examples of comics being used as communication, with evidence of their impact; but it was noted that these projects had started on an ad hoc basis with little connection and no organisation pulling them together, sharing them or helping others develop similar projects.

"I have created some 'comics' about my PhD research for some university exhibitions, and it is such an enjoyable way to share the research with a wider audience".

COMICS AS COMMUNICATION

POSITIVE EXAMPLES WITHIN COMICS PUBLISHING:

- The Centre for Cultural Value used to match researchers and academics with artists.

- Dr Ian Horton's 'applied comics' symposium was mentioned. A summary can be read here.

- The Graphic Medicine movement was heralded as a strong example of how effective these projects can be.

- Likewise Positive Negatives is an organisation amplifying research with global comic and animation projects in over 46 countries, engaging mass audiences in the millions.

- How to nurture these kinds of collaborations? University of California has Bobcat Comics, a roster of academics and artists who work together.

- Outside In provides a platform for artists who encounter significant barriers to the art world due to health, disability, social circumstance, or isolation. *"This is an interesting and important art group working across arts."*

- Books Beyond Words - stories told visually for adults with learning disabilities, dealing with loads of different issues that affect people in everyday life.

POSITIVE EXAMPLES WITHIN COMICS PUBLISHING:

> "...I met a very nice academic who is popularising Maths through drawing and illustrating."

- Some other shared links included:

  - 'How to Study Comics & Graphic Novels: A Graphic Introduction to Comics Studies'. This guide in comics form, written and drawn by members of the Oxford Comics Network and published by TORCH, The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, covers the main aspects related to the study of comics and graphic novels.

  - Nick Sousanis's Unflattening

  - This new research project explores how zines 'craft contention' about mental health – and can help to turn individual struggles into critical issues for society (and mental health services).

  - Kay Sohini did her PHD dissertation in comics form.

COMICS AS COMMUNICATION

CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

- There are different funding streams that artists/academics may not be aware of.

- How do we bring comics into grant applications? There are budgets for 'Public Engagement'.

- There was a question of how researchers and artists can connect and collaborate.

- There is money in research, but when to bring comics in: building them into grant proposals from the start, or at the end stage when there is budget remaining?

- How best to connect artists with researchers?

- Language around 'comics' when introducing comics to different industries. Using 'sequential narrative' or 'visual storytelling' etc.

- Making more people aware of the strength of these kinds of collaborations. The process of creating a comic helps academics think in different ways: it's not just about getting academic research to a wider audience. How to make this benefit more widely known?

- There was a discussion on the importance of making the NHS aware of comics as a form of 'social prescribing', e.g. Turn the Page from Comics Youth.

COMICS AS COMMUNICATION

POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- There were discussions about the importance of educating academics and researchers on how comics can not only help amplify their research but also deepen their understanding of their subject by working visually.

"I'm really interested in how creating texts using comics/picture-writing can enable us to think differently".

- Facilitate better connections between artists and academics.

- Once again a discussion of creating a directory of comic artists arose.
  - *"Comics Forum had a directory of comic artists."*
  - *"There was recently a Kickstarter for a Comic Industry Directory that will be essentially a phone book for comic creators and academics."*
  It's important to note that funding is vital for the upkeep of these directories to ensure continued success.

- Create and distribute a comic targeted at researchers/academics raising awareness of the power of using comics in research projects, including case studies, where to connect with experienced artists and advice on funding and putting together projects.

- Advice for academics on how to bring comics into research projects and potential funding streams available.

- Collecting and sharing examples of applied comics projects online.

ROOM 4: SUPPORT FOR COMIC CREATORS

"What do I need to thrive? RECOGNITION"

Convenor: Myfanwy Tristram

In the room were comics creators and representatives of the Cartoonists Co-op.

SUPPORT FOR COMIC CREATORS

POSITIVE EXAMPLES OF SUPPORT NETWORKS FOR COMIC ARTISTS :

- The Cartoonists Co-op gave a run-down of how they've self-organised to offer resources, workshops, legal advice etc for comics creators. They operate on Discord, via an online forum and through an email newsletter. Membership currently stands at over 500 and they're exploring ways to become increasingly international; they may subdivide into geographic chapters. Following cooperative principals, members must help out in small ways to benefit all. They promote the co-op at conventions etc, but would benefit from being more visible to all creators, including those just starting out.

- ComicScene are working on launching a directory of comics creators.

- One attendee mentioned that their local council kept a list of local authors on their website, to make it easy to find speakers for events, etc. The problem was that they had to have sold a certain number of books to be on the list; but there's scope for lobbying other councils to do similar and to include comics artists.
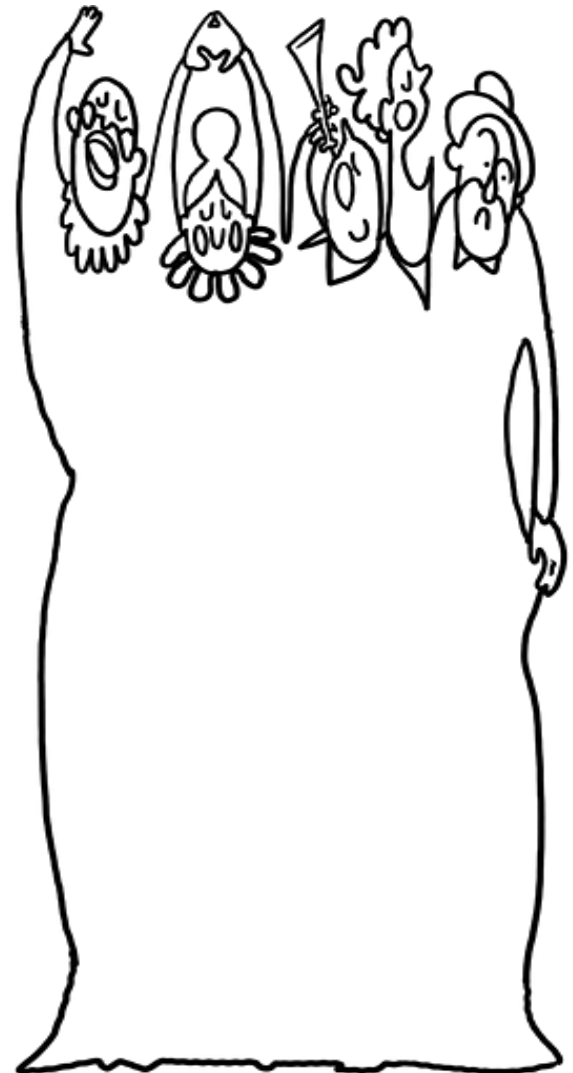
SUPPORT FOR COMIC CREATORS

CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT :

- Several artists reiterated how difficult they find it to apply for grants and how much they would benefit from help. Resources such as The White Pube were mentioned; could these be signposted more strongly to the comics community?

- An attendee recounted seeing their local library inviting children to 'make art with AI'. It would be useful to team up with others and spell out 'this is why using generative AI for art/writing is bad' and share that messaging with libraries and schools etc. Even just having people looking out and ready to call out organisations using AI where they could have used an illustrator is useful.

- How do we make more publishing opportunities for comic artists? How do we persuade the big publishing houses that comics are a good thing to invest in?
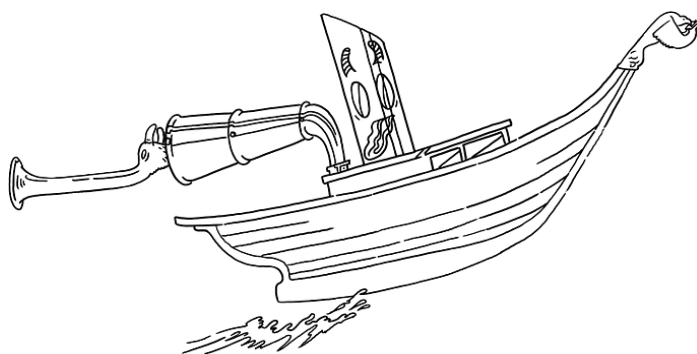
SUPPORT FOR COMIC CREATORS

POTENTIAL ACTIONS :

- CCIC should encourage people to join the co-op and become active through their channels. This will also prevent us from reinventing the wheel, since the co-op has already put in place resources that answer many of our identified needs.

- Create an online directory/index of resources around grants and applications.

- Put out an official statement/open letter about AI.

- Rather than multiple people approaching different councils, we could share resources and wording for a suggested email/approach.

- An 'AI task force' could be ready to look out for poor uses of AI and call them out.

Get involved:

- Kristina Stipetic of SpiderForest is a researcher by trade and is proposing a project to assess the financial situation of webcomic creators. She will analyse data from Webtoon and Tapas and a survey of webcomic creators themselves to learn more about the demographics of the group, effective page-rate, and whether popularity correlates to income, in order to help creators plan their career paths more effectively. She is seeking a sponsoring organisation to help raise the profile of the research and add further expertise, credibility and reach. To find out more about the project and Kristina's work so far, contact kristina.m.stipetic@gmail.com

ROOM 5
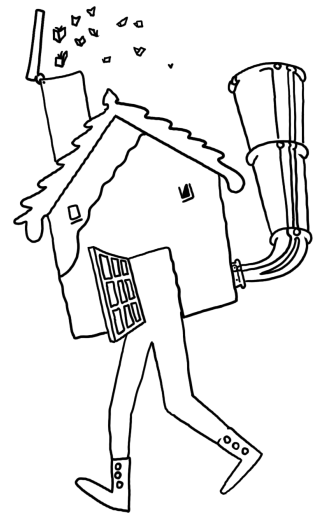
SUPPORT FOR COMICS ORGANISATIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Convenor: Rhiannon Griffiths

Attendees were from a range of organisations (LICAF), Thought Bubble, Society of Authors), creators, emerging creators, publishers, and comics press including Down the Tubes and Broken Frontier.

POSITIVE EXAMPLES OF SUPPORT COMICS ORGANISATIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURE:

- LICAF is not only a major cultural event but also functions as a comics development agency, providing extensive support and development opportunities for comics artists and the wider comics industry. They serve this role through:

1. Professional Development and Training: hosting sessions on various aspects of comics creation, from writing and drawing to inking and digital techniques.
2. Networking and Industry Connections: organising numerous networking opportunities where artists, writers, publishers, and other industry stakeholders can meet, share ideas, and form collaborations.
3. Showcasing and Promoting Talent: showcasing the work of both emerging and established artists through their festival programming.
4. Facilitating Business Opportunities: LICAF's new rights market will help creators pitch their work to publishers, agents, and other industry professionals, facilitating deals for publishing, translation, and adaptation.
5. Educational Outreach and Community Engagement: running educational programmes that introduces young people to the world of comics, inspiring the next generation of creators.

- Thought Bubble, one of the UK's most prominent comic art festivals, provides extensive support to comics creators through various initiatives and programmes. It is recognised for its inclusive approach and efforts to support marginalised creators within the comics industry.
    1. Diverse Programming and Panels: featuring panels and discussions that address issues of diversity, representation, and inclusivity in the comics industry.
    2. Inclusion Scholarships: offering bursaries specifically designed to support marginalised creators. These scholarships help cover the costs of attending the festival, including table fees and travel expenses.
    3. Community Outreach: engaging in community projects and outreach, bringing comics to schools and local communities to encourage literacy and creativity.

POSITIVE EXAMPLES OF SUPPORT COMICS ORGANISATIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURE:

- LD Comics is a notable organisation that focuses on primarily supporting women and non-binary creators. Their work has significant implications for the broader comics workforce, as they provide resources and support that can impact the wider comics infrastructure.

  1. Professional Development: organising workshops and masterclasses on various aspects of comic creation, including writing, drawing, and self-publishing. These sessions are often led by experienced creators and are designed to help participants develop their skills and enhance their professional practice.
  2. Mentorship Programmes: facilitating opportunities that connect emerging creators with experienced professionals, providing guidance, advice, and support to help new creators navigate their careers.
  3. Networking and Community Building: hosting regular meetups and events that provide a space for female and non-binary creators to network, share experiences, and collaborate. These meet-ups foster a supportive community and help creators build valuable industry connections.
  4. Online Communities: they maintain active online communities where members can discuss their work, seek advice, and support each other. This digital network extends the reach of their in-person events and helps connect creators across the UK and beyond.
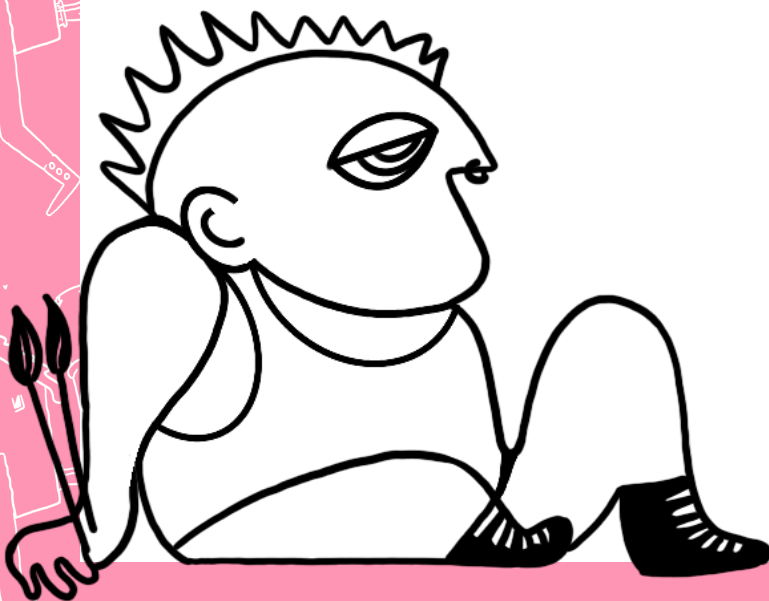
POSITIVE EXAMPLES OF SUPPORT COMICS ORGANISATIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURE:

- The Society of Authors is a union that supports creators across various disciplines, including comics creators. Their support extends to comics organisations and the broader comics workforce in several meaningful ways:
  1. Advocacy and Representation: advocating for the rights and interests of authors, including comics creators, on issues such as fair pay, copyright, and intellectual property. They work to influence policies and regulations that affect the comics industry and authorship in general.
  2. Professional Support and Resources: providing guidance and advice on contracts and agreements, helping comics creators navigate the complexities of publishing deals and licensing agreements.
  3. Advocacy on fair pay and working conditions: campaigning for compensation and improved working conditions for authors, including comics creators. This includes advocating for better payment rates and contractual terms.
  4. Support for Comics Orgs: collaborating with comics orgs and festivals to support and promote the comics industry. This includes participating in events, providing expertise, and supporting initiatives that benefit comics creators.
  5. Publications and Information Dissemination: producing and disseminates guides, reports, and updates on issues relevant to the comics industry.
  6. The SoA has a dedicated Comics Creators Network: CCN membership typically includes access to a range of benefits, such as networking opportunities, industry news, and professional resources. Members can connect with other creators, publishers, and industry professionals to discuss ongoing issues in bi-annual meetings.
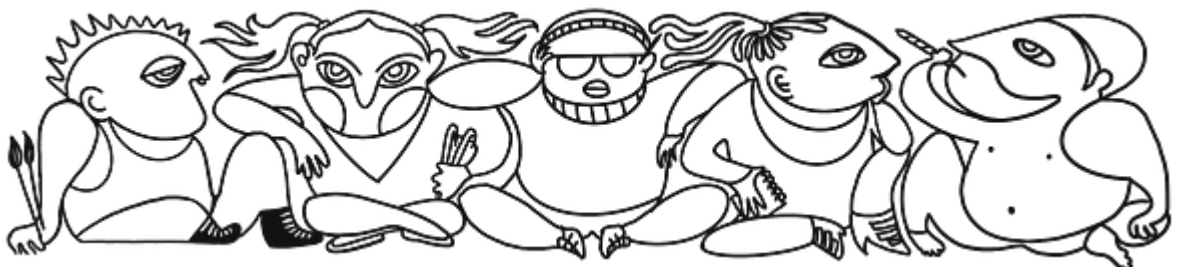
CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT :

- Professional development opportunities are often fragmented or limited in scope. While workshops and masterclasses are valuable, there is a need for more structured and continuous development.

- Sustainable Financial Support. Many creators - especially emerging creators - struggle with financial instability. While some grants are available, they are often limited, classist, and competitive.

- While some organisations advocate for creators, there is a need for a more coordinated and comprehensive approach to address industry-wide issues such as fair pay and conditions.

- Networking opportunities are often limited to specific events or regions. Broader and more inclusive networking opportunities are needed. .

- Emerging and independent creators often struggle to gain entry into the industry or to establish a foothold in a competitive market.

- Lack of centralised information on funding opportunities. Comics creators often struggle to find relevant grants, funding opps, and competitions. Information is scattered across various sources, making it difficult to track and apply for opportunities.

- Comics creators often struggle to gain significant media attention outside niche publications. Mainstream media coverage can be sparse, which limits exposure to broader audiences.

SUPPORT FOR COMICS ORGANISATIONS AND INFRASTURE

POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- Curriculum-Based Training: Develop a structured curriculum covering various aspects of comics creation, business and industry knowledge.
This could include online courses, mentorship programmes, and accredited training modules.

- Career Pathways: Create clear career pathways and resources for different roles within the comics industry, from creators to publishers, to help individuals understand and navigate their professional development

- Dedicated Bid Writing and Skills in Bid Writing.

  - 1) Workshop series: organise regular workshops on bid writing, grant applications, and proposal development.
  - 2) Expert-led training: Host sessions led by experienced grant writers and successful comics creators who have navigated the funding process. Provide practical advice and real-world examples to help creators understand what makes a successful proposal.
  - 3) Crowdfunding support: Provide platforms or support for creators to run successful crowdfunding campaigns, including workshops on best practices and partnerships with crowdfunding platforms.

- Unified advocacy platform: create a central advocacy platform that represents the interests of the comics workforce, working to influence policy changes and industry standards. Produce regular reports on industry trends, challenges, and recommendations to keep creators informed and to drive systemic improvements.

POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- Collaborative Platforms: Develop online platforms or forums that facilitate collaboration and communication between creators, publishers, and other stakeholders.

- Exposure and incubation programmes/distribution channels: Develop incubation programmes that provide emerging creators with mentorship, funding, and exposure opportunities to help them launch their careers. Establish platforms and networks that facilitate exposure and distribution for independent creators, including online marketplaces and festival showcases.

- Website solution: Develop a centralised database on the website that lists current grants, funding opps, and competitions specifically for comics creators, including detailed information on eligibility, deadlines, application process, and links to application forms. Provide bid-writing guides and templates- provide downloadable guides and templates for bid-writing, grant applications, and project proposals. Include examples of successful proposals and tips for effective writing. Create a resource library that includes articles, how-to guides, videos, and other educational materials on various aspects of comics creation, funding, and industry standards.

- Fragmented industry resources: the CCIC website could be a comprehensive resource hub that provides info on promotional opportunities, media contacts, marketing tools, and best practices.

GET INVOLVED:

- Edward Haynes is setting up a new festival - Comics Art in Liverpool Festival (CALF) - to bring together creators and offer engagement, training and networking opportunities while also being accessible in terms of disability, location and finances. There will be a learning and development focus throughout and a strong young people and emerging artists thread. They are currently conducting local R&D in preparation for applying to ACE for funding. To learn more and potentially get involved, drop them an email at teddyhaynes44@gmail.com
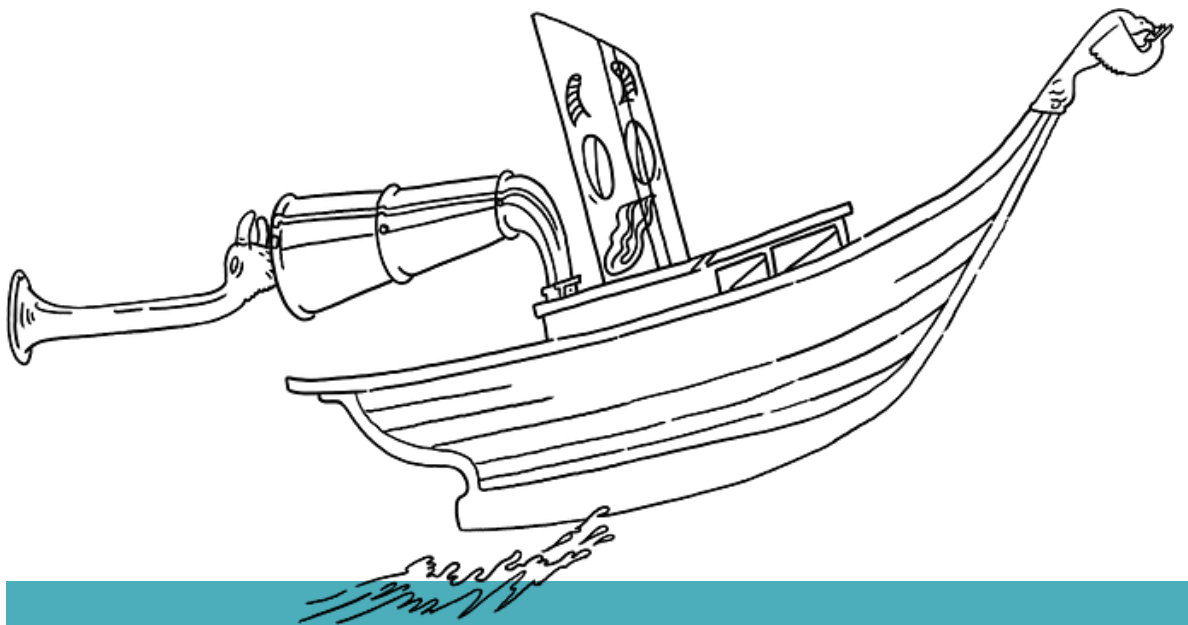
CCIC convened these roundtables with the goal of bringing together the comics community to address - collectively - the issues faced by the sector. We strongly believe that mutual enthusiasm and the will to collaborate are key strengths of our community, particularly in the face of such a profound lack of external support and funding. Ultimately, we hoped that these sessions might consolidate a mutual desire for change, and help shift attitudes towards focussing on what could be possible.

We will be using many of these suggestions to shape our activities as an organisation. If you have more ideas that could impact the sector - or want to discuss any of the above further - email us at helloccic@gmail.com

Thank you for reading!

The Comics Cultural Impact Collective
September 2024

www.thecomicsculturalimpactcollective.org/

"A rising tide lifts all boats"
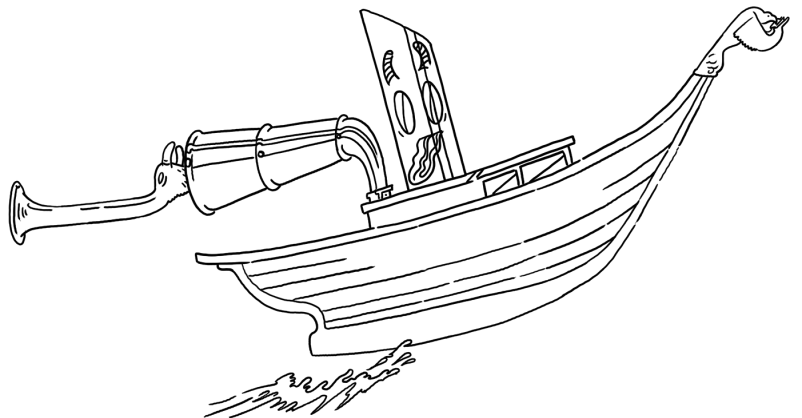
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all members of the comics community: creators, editors, publishers, comic-lovers, booksellers, librarians, academics, festival organisers, teachers and more who attended this round table event and shared their ideas, experiences and wisdom.

FURTHER READING

Find links to much of the research cited, and more, at thecomicsculturalimpactcollective.org/The-Power-of-Comics.

Join us: subscribe to CCIC updates