



# Digital Conference Paper: Comics & Conflicts (2011)

**Paper Title:** Redrawing the lines of “Best Practice” - Adapting documentary comics to war correspondence practices – two opposite case studies

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## <Opening slide>

One of the main distinctions in journalism content is that of 'News and Views'. News is the undisputable, hard facts of the matter. One should aspire to present it in as objective manner as possible, and keep it straight forward and simple. Views on the other hand are the opinions of the writers and their subjective look at things. It is commentators' columns, op-ed articles, experts' opinion and in-depth analysis. It usually contains some hard-facts as a basis for further interpretation, but by no means does it contain the whole of it.

Comics, aside of being a mass communication medium, are also a literary and artistic form that relies heavily on narrative build-up, conflicts, relationships between characters and loaded symbolism.

Comics may act as an informative and educational medium. However, at many times it is not best, nor at its own best, at doing so.

In recent decades, a new genre of comics emerged – documentary comics. It is a genre which relies heavily on true-life stories based upon current world events and it usually wishes to convey ethical, social and political messages and sometime drive people into action (forming an opinion – included!). Some of the most notable works in the genre are those which deals with War correspondence (like 'Vietnam Journal', 'Palestine' etc.), political commentary ('Troubletown – Told you so', '08 elections campaign' GN), Traumatic events ('Exit wounds', New-Orleans AD) and issues in ethical or political conflict or such that cause discomfort. For example: Pyongyang, Borderland Comics etc'. This presentation would look closely at two examples from the first sub-group of the genre – war

correspondence. At many times this genre's style is similar in its rhetoric and narrative build-up to the journalistic writing genre of 'new-journalism'.

However, 'new-journalism' is considered a somewhat problematic practice as it mashes the writer's self voice and feelings into the stories' hard-facts thru its narrative - thus turning it biased and subjective. Journalistic-like comics is therefore in conflict with the most basic 'best practice' notion of traditional journalism.

A word about the notion of 'best practice': There is no such thing as a definitive "best practice" in creating comics. There is no definitive "best practice" in war correspondence writing as well. 'Best Practice" is a notion of guidelines that help better approach issues rather than rules and regulations that are enforced on the content creator.

<Slide 2> However, as more and more accurate, documentary, journalistic like comics, is being published – a series of questions arises: is there a combined "best practice" of creating illustrated war correspondence? What elements - artistic, literary and journalistic, should it include and what are its limitations? How can it be turned to be more effective by certain artistic decisions? - And many more.

I argue that some aspects of the form and content of comics, and their relationship with each other should be taken into account in order to bring together the 'best practice' notions of journalism and comics' creation.

While studying some 'documentary comics' projects of the war correspondence type, I came to the understanding that there are two main forms of projects in

this sub-genre – loosely identified with the two basic journalistic contents of ‘news and views’.

Like news correspondence, some documentary comics’ works tends to be heavily dense, short-form content. In the term short-form I include both comic-strips and short stories of up to 4 pages, for their lack of ability to develop ‘round and deep characters’, complex conflicts and dramatic peaks, and their strong ability to include many small factoids, and precise unbiased facts.

Some notable examples of this sub-form are: ‘Regards from Serbia’ by Aleksandar Zograf, ‘Troubletown – told you so’ by Lloyd Dangle and ‘To Afghanistan and Back’ by Ted Rall.

Long form comics – especially the lately popular Graphic Novel form of self contained stories, tends to resemble the in-depth analysis, and commentary rhetoric of newspaper opinion pages, big investigative exposes with a coherent narrative built into it, and the likes of it – i.e. leaning to the side of ‘the views’.

Among these one can include: ‘The Photographer’ by Guilbert, Lefevre & Lemercier, Joe Sacco’s ‘Safe Zone Gorazde’ and ‘Combat Zone’ by Karl Zeinsmeister (W) & Dan Jurgens (A).

However, which of the two forms is a better message and information conveyor, and to what end? It seems the tension between the two different forms and the current knowledge regarding journalistic approaches about opinion related process is quite hard to bridge.

<Slide 3> Communication studies focusing on information learning found that the readers learn more when they receive short and easy to digest hard facts in the form of a news article with minimum interpretation in it. It is with data obtained

thru such news articles that people may shape opinions. However, cognitive research into psychological process of opinion (such as establishing, changing or re-enforcing a pre-existing opinion) show that in order to achieve long-lasting effects and create true deep change in one's opinion, one of the fundamental needs is for the media consumer to find himself/herself in the situation at matter and sympathize with the characters confronting the subject.

Back to comics – adapting these notions is quite problematic. On one hand, research into literature and narrative studies shows that long-form works are better suited to create sympathy with the readers as they have more space and time, and artistic tool-kit to create complex characters and conflicts, rich background etc.

One the other hand, cognitive research into illustration and symbolism teaches us that the more the content is detailed the less the consumers identify with it. In other words, minimal strips and the usage of smiley faces and stick figures are better suited to create sympathy within the media consumers.

And so – another set of question arises regarding the two different forms of war correspondence: <Slide 4 > what matters more – illustration style or literary style? What form has a better chance at reaching the audience's heart? Should all content matter be treated the same way? Does all the opinion related process need the same treatment or opposite treatment?

I now wish to turn to the two case studies I examined – present my research plan, the main findings and conclusions. Bear in mind – this was a pure quantitative work with regression models, chi square test, coefficients and the likes of it. For

the sake of not blowing our mind with numbers, I'll try to stick to the conclusions rather than to the process.

<Slide 5>The work I'm about to present is based upon a research seminar in the field of public policy making I did under the supervision of Dr. Yeali Bloch-Elkon at the public communication program in the political studies dept. at Bar-Ilan university, Israel. Therefore, it differs much from what you've seen so far in comics' studies and will probably see in the field in general. While most of the comics scholarly work is content oriented, this work is an audience oriented research.

As this research was in many ways the first of its kind, I did not see many reasons in devising full scale readers' survey. Otherwise, a more mild and instant approach was devised - One that combined qualitative content analysis with unobtrusive data gathering methods via the Internet.

<Slide 6>The two stories I chose as case studies are in fact markers of both ends of many scales. On the political scale one is identified as extreme left-wing American war correspondence from behind the enemy lines in Afghanistan. The other is a hard-line conservative right-wing American project, based upon the experience of an embedded journalist who joined the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne battalion at Iraq. On the artistic scale one has a cartoon like, minimalist style and is based upon short-form strips and stories along with text sections, the other is a common graphic novel illustrated in a traditional mainstream American style.

<Slide 7> TAAB, by the left wing journalist and editorial cartoonist Ted Rall was dubbed “the first instant novella” as it was both written and drawn while Rall was in Afghanistan covering the American attacks. In TAAB, Rall openly attacks the administration’s foreign policy. In the strips he systematically presents a critical look at the attacks as inhuman, ineffective and uncalled for, along with the facts of human suffering by the local ‘hostage population’. In the more opinionated text sections, Rall is using his previous knowledge about the culture and society of Afghanistan, to claim that the US foreign policy is driven by the officials’ interests in oil and resources control, and that it is “the wrong thing to do”. His work was not accepted well in the US, as most of the press “rallied around the flag” and supported the official policy line. Nevertheless, according to Rall himself, TAAB sold more than 42,000 copies internationally (many of which in North America), and was translated globally.

<Slide 8> Combat zone: True tales of GIs from Iraq

CZ by the right wing neo-con journalist Karl Zinsmeister (who was later appointed as an advisor to president JWB) is considered Marvel comics’ first OGN in a long time (since sometime in the 90’s). Zeinsmeister, an opinion columnist and researcher for many right wing publications, joined the army twice as an embedded journalist to tours in Iraq and wrote two books depicting his experiences and thoughts about it. In late 2004 Zinsmeister was contacted by Marvel’s publisher Bill Jemas who asked him to adapt his experiences into comics form. It wasn’t until April 2005 that CZ was released as a TPB with Diamond comics distributors’ services to Comics shops in North America and around the world. According to Diamonds’ orders report available freely in the web, it sold

about 4000 copies during the first month, and it can be easily assumed that it did not surpass the 5000 copies circulation as this was the initial print run's size. CZ exemplifies perfectly the style and content of embedded journalist's media product. It deals with the "little soldier" and small scale warfare. It has got almost no high level understanding of the war, and it presents the fighting force as the ultimate hero fighting a just war. Albeit initially looking like a factoid adapted to graphic form, it is in fact a very biased product which shows only information that fits the basic agenda of the writer, is seldom grounded in geographic, historical or actual data and is eschewed by the writers own notions about the local population, the army's role as a order enforcer and the righteousness of the case. In that sense it contains more views than news.

<Slide 9> As this research is not about the comics' content but the audiences' reaction, a survey population had to be established. For that purpose, I used a simple Google search of the exact titles' names and collected all mentioning of them in the first 50 result pages. All pre-release comments and items were discarded and some multiple results were omitted as well. To complete the scan of published materials another search was conducted in the Lexis-Nexis database with the same keywords. Eventually, I came up with 56 candidates, 32 of which are sources about TAAB and 24 are sources about CZ.

<Slide 10> 44 content creators out of 56 were males (without expressed reference, they were considered to be heterosexual as well). 8 were not identified and only 4 were women. Geographically speaking, the poll was Anglo-Saxon centered with 44 creators (78%) in north-America and four more (9%) from either Britain or Australia.

Religiously speaking the poll was homogeneous as well. More than half of the surveyed participants (31 creators or 55%) were Christian, one Jewish and one Muslim. As high as 23 creators (41%) had no identifiable religion. Only ethnically, it was a bit more diverse as there were two Hispanic creators, Japanese and an Arab. Still, most of the identified creators were Caucasian (46%) and nearly the same percent (44%) were not identified.

In terms of education, 50% had academic degrees of some kind, 26 creators (nearly 46%) were not identified and only one creator had only graduated from high school.

24 reviews (about 42%) were published in Amazon.com or Amazon.UK. Other 13 reviews were published in review columns in newspapers and magazines.

Only 7 reviews (12.5%) were published in Comics oriented sites and 8 were personal blog posts. The political news media hadn't paid many attentions to both books and only 4 such publications were included in the poll. 35 creators were identified as liberals while 17 were conservatives. 4 creators' political affiliation was not recognized.

To sum up things, the poll was consisted of an overly WASP population. For a small scale cursory examination this is a good thing as it might help generalize the findings a bit more easily.

<Slide 11>As for the main findings:

the statistical analysis shows that more people learnt new information from reading TAAB (54% vs. 41%). This finding was true for both commentators who held prior liberal opinion and conservative opinion; all the more it was an eye-opener for people who stated they had no opinion before reading the books.

Keep in mind this is not a comparative research – I.E. Not all the people who read one book and commented about it read and commented about the other.

Apparently, liberals learnt more from the conservative affiliated book than the other way around.

In both cases, comics had the effect of re-enforcing prior opinion rather than changing a pre-existing one. However, the effect was slightly stronger in the long-form GN, albeit it being less popular at the overall survey. This finding can be explained in two opposite ways: first, less conservative opinion holders read TAAB and reported about it and more liberals read CZ and reported about it. Second, both sides came out more convinced that their prior anti/pro-war in Iraq opinion is true because it wasn't a loaded subject such as the war in Afghanistan.

Moreover, this finding is very interesting because it implies that those convinced in the policy were less affected than the opposing, neutral and apathic groups and this suggests that documentary comics as soft news journalism, is an information source for the uninformed no matter its form.

However, to conclude – it seems the best practice issue is not yet resolved. The mass communication past research findings were reaffirmed again; If one is interested in conveying new information than short-form would do the trick best. If one looks for long lasting effect about pre-existing issue – long form it is. With this knowledge, comics' creators can now make better informed artistic decisions to better support their own personal agenda. Hopefully for many that also means more long form non-mainstream art projects?!

<Slide 12> Thank you for listening, I hope I'll be able to answer all your questions from up my sleeve. If I fail to do so, please don't hesitate to drop me a line at my email.

Ofer Berenstein.