**Public Information Comics and Archival Memories**

Ian Horton, London College of Communication, University of the Arts London.

[i.horton@lcc.arts.ac.uk](mailto:i.horton@lcc.arts.ac.uk)

Abstract

This paper will examine the self-styled public information comics *Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology* and *Archives and Memor*y, both published by Scottish Centre for Comics Studies Scottish Centre for Comics Studies (SCCS) in 2018. The comics in question deal with notions of the archival in very different ways both conceptually and stylistically. The discussion will highlight the legal and social justice issues these comics raise while focusing on the complex relationship between archival materials and memory. It will additionally consider these in relation to the concept of public information comics and unpack what such comics do that goes beyond the mere communication of information.

In 2019 the Scottish Centre for Comics Studies (SCCS) at the University of Dundee published *Public Information Comics* to provide an overview of the comics they had previously created that, in their own words ‘...educate and advise the public on issues such as healthcare, science communication, crime prevention and government policy’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition to outlining the participatory and collaborative creative processes behind the comics they produced, *Public Information Comics* considers aspects of the medium that make it such a valuable communication tool. It specifically emphasises the role the reader plays in interpreting complex image-text combinations suggesting that these kinds of comics are effective because they not only ‘... tell stories, they embody and perform them’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

[Figure 1 HERE]

*Public Information Comics* also notes the impact such comics can have on the recipients of the message and proposes that these comics can alter behaviour and change attitudes.[[3]](#footnote-3) This concept was explored by comic artist and theorist Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art* where he argued that the medium can be used to inform and create attitudinal change in the reader as well as provide entertainment.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This paper investigates some of the issues raised in *Public Information Comics* by analysing two comics produced by the SCCS that tackle the subject of archives, noting how the archival can intersect with legal considerations and aspects of social justice. It concludes by considering the strategies these comics employ in communicating their respective messages and by questioning the use of the term public information comics when describing and defining these publications.

Maaheen Ahmed and Benoit Crucifix’s edited collection *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles*, has recently focused attention on how memory has, and continues to, inform Comics Studies as a discipline. They pose the questions ‘What do comics do with, and to, memory and what does memory do to comics?’ then argue that these questions can be addressed using what they posit as the interrelated concepts of the archival and style.[[5]](#footnote-5) Following their lead this paper will examine *Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology* and *Archives and Memor*y, both published by SCCS in 2018, two comics that deal with notions of the archival in very different ways both conceptually and stylistically.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology* (hereafter *Chronicle*) wasproduced with the clear intention of promoting the comic collections in the University of Dundee Archives and original comic art held by the university’s Museum Services. It is worth noting that comic collections and archives are relatively new phenomena in academic institutions, as Jenny Robb notes

For most of the 20th century, librarians – both public and academic – shunned the idea of spending precious financial, staff or space resources on collecting, preserving and cataloguing comics and cartoons.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It is significant that Comics Studies scholars at the University of Dundee have been able to build such a collection and that SCCS actively seeks to promote it, clearly what were once considered as ephemera are now considered worthy of preservation and study.

Hailey Austin, a PhD student at the university, was the driving force behind the creation of *Chronicle* which followed an internship where she had been tasked with cataloguing these collections. When editing the comic she actively sought collaborations to curate an anthology representing a range of different responses to the material.

I asked fellow comics PhD students and artists in Ink Pot studios if they were interested in making comics as a result of, inspired by, and/or telling the story of various works in the comics collections. The response was overwhelmingly positive, leading me to extend the invitation to comics Master’s students as well as incoming 4th year Illustration students.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The result is a collaborative work that references the anthology traditions of British comics in the diversity of art styles used throughout and the individual stories exploring the collections in a variety of very different ways. Space does not afford for a detailed examination of all fourteen contributions but a selection of these affords a sense of the issues raised by the anthology.

The first story in *Chronicle* is ‘Adventures in Panelology’. Scripted by Chris Murray and with art by Elliot Balson, the text outlines the growth of the comic collections and highlights other materials besides the comics such as original artwork and scripts, as well as correspondence between editors, writers and artists.[[9]](#footnote-9) Many of the donations were from amateur comic collectors, such as Peter Hansen, or comic professionals such as the editor of *2000AD* Matt Smith, publisher John McShane and writer Grant Morrison. The majority of these donors bring different levels of expertise from their work within the comic book industry but in terms of contributing to the creation of an archive they are best considered as fervent fans rather than archival authorities. When discussing the future of archives Theimer argues that professional archivists may no longer be responsible for making decisions about what is suitable for inclusion in our collections and that we might instead rely on ‘...citizen archivists, passionate amateurs and communities of enthusiasts.’[[10]](#footnote-10) The University of Dundee comics collection supports this view as it has clearly been shaped by passionate amateurs and enthusiasts with donors such as those noted above playing an important role in creating these archives.

‘Adventures in Panelology’ additionally notes the potential legal requirements of archival holdings and the restrictions place on some donations. For example, the aforementioned *2000AD* scripts given by Matt Smith were donated with the proviso that they can only be viewed in the archive itself but not digitized or downloaded.[[11]](#footnote-11) Similarly, the majority of the actual comics donated can only be read physically in the archive as it is not possible to either scan them or distributed digitally without infringing copyright.

Although not mentioned in *Chronicle* the University of Dundee comic archives also contains material related to the short-lived British children’s anthology comic *Oink!* (1986-88) published by IPC which raises another legal consideration, the issue of censorship. Comics have often faced the wrath of censors, most notably the moral panic generated by debates around horror and crime comics in both America and Britain in the 1950s, and the taboo topics tackled by Underground Comix in the 1960 and 1970s. *Oink!* was rather subversive as a children’s comic and contained stories and characters that often parodied both other comic book characters and real people. One such character was ‘Mary Lighthouse’ a parody of Mary Whitehouse a prominent member of the Clean-Up TV pressure group and founder of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association in the 1960s. A story in *Oink!* titled ‘Janice and John and the Parachute Jump’ was seen by Whitehouse’s organisation as an attack on family values and their complaints led to a hearing at The Press Council, a body created in 1953 to deal with excesses in the print media.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although *Oink!* won the adjudication of The Press Council they did not learn their lesson and this caused internal tensions within IPC with John R. Sanders, the managing director of the Youth Group arm of the company, sending a letter to Tony Husband, one of the editors behind *Oink!*, registering his concerns with a strip in issue 26 of the comic which parodied the long running children’s television programme The Sooty Show then being hosted by Matthew Corbett. This letter is worth quoting in full for the legal issues it raises.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Dear Tony,

We shall be luckiest people alive if we don’t get a writ for the back page of Oink (sic) issue number 26.

Bob Paynter tells me he passed this page, and defends it on the basis that we are not dealing with real people.

There cannot be anything more real than this page. I think Matthew Corbett would be entitled to go stark raving mad (unless, of course, he is a friend of yours and is therefore quite happy to see himself cast in the light of a smelly horrid fellow who doesn’t wash his armpits).

I imagine he will dun us for a substantial sum of money.

You must take the greatest care when you make it quite obviously clear that you are referring to a real person, or the real creations of a real person. This has to be the case with this particular story, and it must in my view be defamatory.

Have a sleepless night.

Kind regards

John R Sanders

The damage created by the negative publicity generated by The Press Council complaint resulted in both declining sales and ongoing tensions within IPC, so that only two years after it was launched, *Oink!* was cancelled by the publisher. Here, one can observe the risks of representation, and the way in which comics such as *Oink!* negotiated – or failed to – the boundaries between parody, censorship, and experimentation.

*Chronicle* also contains the story ‘Into the Archives’ by David Robertson which revels in the range of material held in the comic collections in a similar way to ‘Adventures in Panelology’. Robertson additionally specifically addresses the nostalgia evoked by the smell of the comics and the thrill of finding familiar titles such as Jack Kirby’s *New Gods* and *Forever People*.[[14]](#footnote-14) The concept of nostalgia is explored in some detail in ‘Remembering’, the first section of Ahmed and Crucifix’s edited collection on comics memory, with chapters considering the difficulties of creating a deliberately nostalgic comic and examining reader responses when recalling the nostalgia of comics and childhood. [[15]](#footnote-15) The nostalgia of remembering in relation to comic collecting is evident in ‘Into the Archives’ where Robertson is pictured going through the archival boxes with the caption ‘I keep on thinking I’m at a comic mart, and I’ll buy these later’ and later in the story a thought bubble suggests that he should take the comics home with him![[16]](#footnote-16)

The materiality of comics is clearly important for Robertson and this issue is the focus of several other stories in *Chronicle*. ‘Foom’ by Eve Greenwood examines the value of studying original artworks rather than the comics themselves, noting the visceral experience of examining these rather than the published pages.[[17]](#footnote-17) [Figure 2 HERE] These original artworks reveal aspects of the process such as corrections made with tippex and panels taped to pages in addition to the pasted-on speech balloons and thought bubbles. The importance of original artwork is also evident in the final story in the anthology a photocomic titled ‘For the Record’ created by Hailey Austin and Rebecca Horner. This contains a sequence where individual creators reveal their own working processes by showing how they used comic art from the archives as source material when producing content for the anthology.[[18]](#footnote-18) Process is also addressed in the story ‘The Adventures of Little Scripty in Commandoland’ by Calum and Catriona Laird but this time the focus is on the scripts, in this case those produced for the digest British comic book *Commando*. This story imagines a script as the main character and takes it through the entire production process, from synopsis to full script and then via sub-editing to final publication before finally ‘hiding’ itself in the archive.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Megan Sinclair’s ‘The Secrets of Memory’ takes a very different approach to the majority of stories in *Chronicle* by looking at the relationship between personal archives, memory and autobiographical comics. In this story Sinclair references the creation of her own comics dealing with bereavement and considers these in relation to Nicola Streeten’s notes and production work for *Billy, Me & You* (2007) which are held in the archive. Sinclair specifically highlights the value of the personal archive, in her case diaries, and the processes by which these memories can be shared.[[20]](#footnote-20) Here, the materiality of comics in the way in which memories can be portrayed using a variety of representational strategies, offers a method of negotiating the past (and often difficult memories) that could prove useful for individuals or communities that have experienced criminal and other offences to ‘work through’ the visceral, affective, and procedural aspects of those experiences through an exploration of those archives.

The complex relationship between archives and memories is also examined in the public information comic *Archives and Memory* created by Golnar Nabizadeh and Catriona Laird. The introductory text states that

Archives can be thought of in many different ways – they may be photos, letters, diaries, official records, monuments, databases and other documents. But archives are also people’s memories, personal anecdotes, and shared histories and find expression through artworks that can re-inscribe the past in new and different ways.[[21]](#footnote-21)

This discourse continues in the opening page of the comic itself which includes dictionary definitions of the term archive as both a noun and an adjective, then visualises different ways that we might consider the archive ourselves from the official to the personal and from the analogue to the digital. The next page begins the story of a nameless family, two children and their parents, escaping the invasion of an anonymous city in an unknown location. They pack significant belongings, a photograph of an elderly couple and a bundle of letters, in a small attaché case and with one of the children grasping a teddy bear cross the border to safety. In the process the teddy bear loses an arm and the photograph of the elderly couple is torn so that the image of the woman’s face is partially lost. These signs of damage, if not actual violence, are emphasized on the cover of the comic where the attaché case, teddy bear, bundle of letters and photograph are represented in a full page illustration along with a painting of the elderly couple based on the photograph. In the final pages of the comic we see one of the children repairing the arm of the teddy bear and the mother making a painting of the elderly couple based on the photograph. Both actions can be seen as acts of restitution where items that constitute the personal archive of the family are restore, all be it in altered states which bear the traces or memories of the journey they have undertaken.

The visualization of the narrative described so far is painstaking in removing as much contextual information as possible which at first makes it seem rather generic. We have no idea where in the world the family is coming from or where they are going to and this must be a deliberate act designed to make the story understandable and applicable to many and not just the few. The fact that this story drew on research undertaken by Dr Dima Saber and Professor Paul Long into crowd sourced citizen archives from Syria is only indicated by a quote and footnote towards the end of the comic.[[22]](#footnote-22) Evidence of this underpinning research is however suggested through a secondary narrative running throughout the comic showing images of a woman in what could be Middle-Eastern dress with a red chequered scarf. She is depicted taking pictures of the invasion of the city, meets the family at the border crossing when their passports are checked and is seen at a computer screen recovering digital images of the conflict to be shared online as proof of the ongoing violence including the destruction of the archives in the city library. [Figure 3 HERE]

The intertwined narratives in *Archives and Memory* both touch on the role of photographic images as archival materials. In Bettina Egger’s study of Emmanuel Guibert’s comic *Le Photographe* (2003) she focuses on the process by which the photographic archive of photojournalist Didier Lefèvre is used as a device to prompt memories of his time in Afghanistan with Médecins Sans Frontières in the 1980s. In analysing *Le Photographe* Egger draws on Aleida Assmann’s work on cultural memory to consider what happens to the truth claims of these archival photographic images when they collide with the drawn language of comics in an act of remembering.[[23]](#footnote-23) As Assmann has noted herself ‘Control of the archive is control of memory’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Indeed, two of the main female character’s in *Archives and Memory* seem to take control of photographic archives and by implication cultural and personal memory, one by the recovery and distribution of corrupted digital files and the other by creating a painted reproduction of a damaged photographic image.

The overall narrative, use of oral histories as source material and play with the photographic image as bearer of truth claims in *Archives and Memory* can also be linked to the issue of social justice. The comic depicts official records and documents which are contrasted with the more personal family archives, these official documents include the passports allowing the main protagonists to cross the border away from conflict and the records destroyed in the public library. Nabizadeh has tackled issues of memory and social justice in other works such as the book chapter ‘The Lives of Others: Figuring Grievability and Justice in Contemporary Comics and Graphic Novels’ which additionally considered the melancholia faced by those who are forced to flee their homelands and the ways in which the comics format of panels and gutters leaves a space for such loss to be sensitively handled.

Issues of social justice have in recent years come to the fore in the field of Comics Studies most notably with the formation of Graphic Justice which styles itself as a ‘A research community at the intersections of law, comics, and justice’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Thomas Giddens was a driving force behind its formation in 2013 and has subsequently published widely on the topic with his monograph *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics:* *Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing* taking a similar approach to Nabizadeh by highlighting the way the formal aesthetics of comics, in its use of multiple frames and modes of depiction, impacts on how the law and issues of social justice can be represented.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Clearly *Archives and Memory* and *Chronicle* further our understanding of the complex relationships between archives and memory, additionally highlighting the legal and social justice issues tied to these concepts. However, it is questionable if these two comics fit neatly under the umbrella term of public information comics. When discussing such publications Sol M. Davidson argues that the term ‘impact comics’ is most suitable as it allows public relations and even advertising comics to be grouped together with those that provide information as a significant sub-group that is distinct from comics designed to purely entertain. [[27]](#footnote-27)

*Chronicle* goes beyond informing readers about the existence of the comics collection at the University of Dundee and has impact by actively promoting the collection and persuading readers of its value. In seeking to persuade, *Chronicle* functions more like a public relations comic and this term describes this aspect of this comic most effectively.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, some of the stories in *Chronicle* do more than promote the collection, they reflect on other issues such as nostalgia and the materiality of comics, the creative process of making comics and the relationship between archives and memory. In this respect *Chronicle* goes beyond informing or persuading the reader and instead provides reflections on the value of comics collections for researchers and practitioners by showing an embodied personal engagement with the material.

By contrast *Archives and Memory* hardly mentions its use of source materials and instead takes a more emotive approach to exploring the subject of personal archives and memory. It cannot be considered as a public information comic as it tells us nothing of the actual situation in Syria that led the family to flee or of their final destination and does little to promote the research from Syria underpinning the narrative or persuade readers to take action regarding the plight of those caught in such situations. However, in this instance, the way the comics medium can ‘...embody and perform’[[29]](#footnote-29) stories demonstrates how personal archives can be recovered or restored along with their associated memories. It is this issue of memory in relation to the archival that most clearly links *Archives and Memory* and *Chronicle*. They work with the affordances of the comic book medium to both show and tell and then ask their readers to reflect on the value of archival sources in preserving fragile memories.

Figure 1- Golnar Nabizadeh, Chris Murray and Letty Wilson, *Public Information Comics*. (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2019) 7.

Figure 2 – Eve Greenwood “FOOM” in Hailey Austin (ed), Chronicle: *The Archive and Museum Anthology* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018) 25.

Figure 3 - Golnar Nabizadeh and Catriona Laird, *Archives and Memory* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018) 6.

1. Golnar Nabizadeh, Chris Murray and Letty Wilson, *Public Information Comics.* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2019) 3. Note in the production of these comics SCCS work in conjunction with Ink Pot a comic creator studio based in the Dundee Comics Creative Space (DCCS). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (W. W. Norton 2008) 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Maaheen Ahmed and Benoit Crucifix, (eds) *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles* (Palgrave Macmillian 2018) 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hailey Austin (ed), *Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018); Golnar Nabizadeh and Catriona Laird, *Archives and Memory* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jenny Robb, ‘The Librarians and Archivists’ in Matthew W. Smith and Randy Duncan (eds), *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies* (Routledge 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hailey Austin (ed), *Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018) 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid 4-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kate Theimer, ‘It’s the end of the archival profession as we know it, and I feel fine’ in Caroline Brown (ed), *Archival Futures* (Facet Publishing 2018) 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hailey Austin (ed), *Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018) 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. David Huxley ‘Oink! The Story of a Dangerously Funny Comic’ in Ian Hague, Ian Horton and Nina Mickwitz (eds), *Contexts of Violence in Comics* (Routledge 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See letter from John R. Sanders dated 22nd April 1987 held in the University of Dundee archives https://archives.dundee.ac.uk/ms-341-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hailey Austin (ed), *Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018) 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The two chapters in this section are Giorgio Busi Rizzi, ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Nostalgic: Seth’s *It’s a Good Life if You Don’t Weaken*’ in Maaheen Ahmed and Benoit Crucifix, (eds) *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles* (Palgrave Macmillian 2018); Mel Gibson, ‘“It’s All Come Flooding Back?”: Memories of Childhood Comics’ in Maaheen Ahmed and Benoit Crucifix, (eds) *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles* (Palgrave Macmillian 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hailey Austin (ed), *Chronicle: The Archive and Museum Anthology* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018) 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid 25. For an overview of the issue of materiality and comics see Ian Hague, *Comics and the Senses: A multisensory approach to comics and graphic novels*, (Routledge, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid 32-4. This story seems to reference the photocomics that appeared in British comics during the 1970s and 1980s. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid 26-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid 22-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Golnar Nabizadeh and Catriona Laird, *Archives and Memory* (UniVerse, University of Dundee 2018) 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Dima Saber and Paul Long, ‘I will not leave, my freedom is more precious than my blood’. From affect to precarity: crowd-sourced citizen archives as memories of the Syrian war’ (2017) 38 (1) *Archives and Records: The Journal of the Archives and Records Association* - Archives and Public History: Places, Pasts and Identities 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bettina Egger, ‘Archives and Oral History in Emmanuel Guibert’s *Le Photographe’* in Maaheen Ahmed and Benoit Crucifix, (eds) *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles* (Palgrave Macmillian 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerugrsräume* (C. H. Beck 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. https://graphicjustice.org/about/ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Thomas Giddens, *On Comics and Legal Aesthetics: Multimodality and the Haunted Mask of Knowing* (Routledge 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Sol M. Davidson ‘“The Funnies” Neglected Branch: Special Purpose Comics’ (2005). 7 (2) *International Journal of Comic Art* 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ian Horton ‘Comic Books, Science (Fiction) and Public Relations’ in Simon Collister and Sarah Roberts-Bowman (eds), *Visual & Spatial Public Relations: Strategic Communication Beyond Text* (Routledge 2018). This argues that public relations comics form a significant sub-genre quite distinct from advertising and informational comics and that these kinds of comics employ visual tropes from mainstream genres such as superhero and science-fiction comics. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)