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## Bringing superheroes into the fight against COVID-19 misinformation

SATHYARAJ VENKATESAN AND A DAVID LEWIS

10 February 2021



Anwar Chitrakar, a folk artist from Bengal, adapted the indigenous patachitra style to light-hearted COVID-19 art. ANWAR CHITRAKAR/EMAMI ART

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**COVID-19**



(/covid-19)

In March 2020, Indian comic book publisher Raj Comics released *Nagraj Strikes: The Attack of Coronaman*, a comic on how Coronaman, a hideous and insidious villain, takes over the fictional city of Mahanagar to infect people with COVID-19. The hero Nagraj's efforts to destroy the Coronaman by spewing venomous breath fails. He then sees coronavirus prevention measures on television—wash hands often, cough into your elbow, don't touch your face, keep safe distance from other people, stay home if you can.

Nagraj finds that he does not have to save the people in his city. They have kept the Coronaman away by following isolation, distancing and sanitisation measures.

Over the past year, artists, doctors, medical professionals, and international agencies such as the World Health Organisation have been using comics to communicate the risks of the SARS-CoV2 virus. The visual economy and a near-universal language of lines, balloons, and panels in comics makes them well suited to disseminate epidemic-related information to children and adults.

The sudden emergence of the novel coronavirus, about which the world knew so little, was unfortunately also a perfect breeding ground for medical and public health misinformation. Myths about the coronavirus proliferated as fast as the pandemic spread around the world. Misleading content included fallacies such as the notion that eating meat can cause infection; that Ayurveda could cure infection; that consuming garlic or rinsing the nose with saline can prevent infection; that silver solution can kill coronavirus within 12 hours; that 5G mobile networks spread the coronavirus. Such fictions populated inboxes, WhatsApp chats, messengers, and social media feeds, especially in the early days of the pandemic and generated a lot of online engagement due to clickbait headers.

Coronavirus hoaxes and conspiracy theories gained more

traction in a post-truth world where the convening power of truth and facts have diminished.

However, comics have used the same principles of concise, easily shareable formats to relay medical facts through engaging visual storytelling. Comics like these are part of a genre of graphic narratives called graphic medicine which tell stories supported by hard medical data. Ian Williams, a British physician and a comic artist, coined the term “graphic medicine” in 2007. Williams was looking for a handy, all-encompassing term for the depiction of health and medicine in comics while he completed his master’s thesis on comics and healthcare. The phrase was acknowledged by Michael Green and Kimberley Myers in their article on the subject published (<https://www.bmj.com/bmj/section-pdf/186501?path=/bmj/340/7746/Analysis.full.pdf>) in 2010 in the *British Medical Journal*.

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Graphic medicine refers to the intersection of comics and the discourse of health, illness, and wellness. It includes a range of materials including hand-drawn posters, cartoons, sequential and single-paneled drawn images, visual case studies, medical instruction and tools, or narrated medical infographics, disseminated through traditional platforms like print and non-traditional platforms like social media. As a sub-field of health humanities—an interdisciplinary field that draws on arts and humanities in its approach to the experience of health, illness, wellbeing—graphic medicine during a pandemic plays multiple roles: as a witness to an unfolding crisis, as a health literacy tool, and as a medium which captures the intricacies of contemporary life.

Manoj Gupta and Ayush Gupta who are the president and brand manager of Raj Comics, and also father and son, created *Nagraj Strikes* to spread awareness about COVID-19. Raj Comics has created a host of home-grown superheroes for Indian audiences since 1984. Nagraj, perhaps the most Herculean superhero in the Raj Comics universe, has been one of their most popular characters as children growing up in India in the 80s and 90s might remember. He is based on a Hindu myth of a shape-shifting snake. In earlier comics, Nagraj would use his multiple powers such as deploying snakes, hypnotism, body fusions among others to defeat villains such as Seaman, Shankar Shahanshah and his bête noir Professor Nagamani. In a blurb introducing the *Nagraj Strikes* comic, Ayush Gupta said that it is “a tiny effort by Raj Comics to spread awareness about preventions from the global Covid-19 outbreak.” Aswin Amarnath R created the artwork with its layouts typical of superhero graphic narratives. The comic places the onus on the general public to follow precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the disease.

India’s ministry of health and family welfare has produced a COVID-19 mini-comic of 22 pages for children titled *Kids, Vaayu and Corona: Who wins the Fight?* The comic was conceptualised and scripted by Ravindra Khaiwal, an additional professor of environmental health at the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research in Chandigarh and Suman Mor, an associate professor of

environment studies at Punjab University. The mini-comic features Vaayu, a cape-wearing young superhero who lives in the foothills of Himalayas. His sole aim is to “work for better public health and environment.” The story starts with a busy parent unable to resolve his child’s niggling doubts about the coronavirus. She and two friends seek Vaayu’s help. Throughout the comic, the dialogue between Vaayu and children serves to dispel doubts about the nature of the pandemic, its symptoms, and precautions to take. For example, in one of the panels, Vaayu clarifies how the virus spreads and says, “If you shake hands with your friend then you can pass the virus to your friends.” Finally, in a defining single-panel page, Vaayu lists out essential preventive measures such as social distancing, greeting in traditional ways, proper hygiene as ways to reduce the risk of getting COVID-19.

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India's health ministry produced a 22-page comic called Kids, Vaayu and Corona: Who wins the Fight? MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND FAMILY WELFARE

Argha Manna, a science communicator and journalist in Kolkata, has hand drawn a comic called *Be Aware of Droplets and Bubbles!!* which is research-intensive. Keenly observing common behaviors among pedestrians in India, such as spitting, coughing, and sneezing openly, the comic conveys their public health hazards during an outbreak of an infection that spreads through droplets. Manna told me “I was really interested to dig out how a contagious agent spreads through spit bubbles.” One of references was the



work by Lydia Bourouiba, a physical applied mathematician and her group on fluid dynamics and epidemiology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “I studied their research work minutely and then scripted the narrative for my comics,” Manna said. The comic has been published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, a prominent medical journal published by the American College of Physicians.

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Argha Manna's *Be Aware of Droplets and Bubbles!!* uses fluid dynamics to explain the public health hazards of spitting, coughing, and sneezing openly during a disease outbreak. ARGHA MANNA

Comics have a long history of representing catastrophes including pandemics. A century ago, American cartoonists used characters helped spread awareness about the global influenza pandemic of 1918, the deadly outbreak during the last year of World War I. These included Budd Fisher's characters Mutt and Jeff and Charles A Voight's Petey Dink. Edwina Dumm created a panel in which her protagonist—a mischievous boy called Cap Stubbs—goads his friends to play soldier and “have a battle” with him. However, to his surprise, his friends say they cannot play because of the influenza. One character even hollers to Cap not to come near him, declaring the need for social distancing.

 (<https://caravanmagazine.in/health/superheroes-in-the-fight-against-misinformation/attachment-16655>)



Edwina Dumm used her Cap Stubbs cartoon to talk about the importance of social distancing during the 1918 influenza pandemic.

Comics were also used to spread awareness, educate, and mitigate the fears about HIV/AIDS which hit the United States in the 1980s. *Strip AIDS USA* was a comic anthology that addressed the social and medical aspects of the epidemic. Published by the Last Gasp, *Strip AIDS USA* is a lineup of 121 comic artists including stalwarts such as Will

Eisner, Garry Trudeau, and Howard Cruse. Comprised of single-panel, double-panel and mini-comics, *Strip AIDS USA* elaborated on everything from the dangers of homophobia to safe sex, from AIDS paranoia to HIV criminalization. In recent years, Gary Varvel created editorial cartoons on the H1N1 outbreak and Dan Collins drew a comic about SARS called ‘Sarszilla’—Godzilla meets SARS. Sarszilla was a single-paneled comic depicting a mask-wearing Godzilla busy ravaging a city. In presenting a monster as wearing a mask, the comics reiterates the importance of such a precaution in public places.

Cartoonists in the US have engaged with illness in their work for many years. Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* in 1972 about obsessive compulsive disorder and Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner's *Our Cancer Year* in 1994 are some of the earliest examples. In England, Al Davison's created *The Spiral Cage* in 1988 about living with disability. Prominent full-length graphic medical narratives include Canadian illustrator Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* about Alzheimer's disease and French comic book artist David B's *Epileptic* about the seizure disorder. These stories feature a narrator who is a doctor, caregiver, or a patient themselves.

Two cultural antecedents helped graphic medicine to mature rapidly: the underground comix movement—alternative comics that emerged in the US in the 1960s as

part of youth counterculture—and the narrative medicine movement of the 1990s. The comix movement revolutionised content by examining socially relevant issues such as sexuality, illness, race, mental health conditions and addiction. Narrative medicine emphasised the individual's illness experience and the need for a humane patient-centered medical practice. Graphic medicine also benefits from an ongoing trend which capitalises on global curiosity around both comics and illness narratives. Put together, these discursive and material conditions paved the way for the emergence of graphic medicine.

In India, generic and government-sponsored, evidence-based science comics tried to stave off misinformation about COVID-19. Other comics deftly mixed information and humor to convey the everyday impact of COVID-19. Brown Paperbag, Sanitary Panels and Mean Curry, which are webcomics in India, use subversion and puns to address pressing questions about coronavirus and quarantine practices. Anwar Chitrakar, a folk artist from Bengal, adapted the indigenous patachitra—traditional cloth-based scroll painting—to light-hearted COVID-19 art.

In the age of social media, the problem is more often too much information rather than too little. The Nib (<https://thenib.com/covid-19-myths-debunked/>), a popular US online daily comics zine, ran a comic called 'COVID-19 Myths Debunked' that helped (<https://thenib.com/covid-19->

myths-debunked/) sort through good information and bad. The Nib has frequently tackled subjects like healthcare disparities and women's health. Here, though, Taylor and Shwed look to dispel misleading information on the pandemic. No, COVID-19 is not like the flu. Yes, it can be transmitted by children.

Different comics speak to different demographics. For instance, GoInvo, a healthcare design company in the US, created (<https://www.goinvo.com/vision/coronavirus/>) "Understanding the Novel Coronavirus", an infographic charts and illustrations that looks suited to an office wall, not unlike those from a savvy human resources department. But a comic that seems aimed at children might have a secondary audience with adults. The *Washington Post's* "Handwashing Like a Pro" is aimed (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/opinions/amp-stories/outlook-coronavirus-hand-washing/>) at children with handwashing motions named Spider's Kissing and Kung-Fu Grip, but it offers accessible and kind visuals that prove helpful for adults as well.

COVID-19 comics can be about more than virus education and pandemic protocols. They can advise on the legal and social elements of living through COVID-19. Illustrator Maddy Buck created (<https://www.maddybuck.com/lets-draw-law-blog/federalquarantinepowers>) Federal Quarantine Powers, an online zine, as an explainer of the US

government's abilities and responsibilities during such a global disaster. Buck traces how an organisation like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can enact containment measures from the US Constitution to local deployment. Nashville-based writer Malaka Gharib collaborated with National Public Radio's Life Kit series to produce (<https://www.npr.org/2020/07/28/896134292/covid-19-etiquette-6-common-conundrums-and-a-printable-pocket-guide>) "A Pocket Guide to COVID-19 Ettiquette with Elaine Swann," a printable mini-comic. The travel-sized booklet advises readers on such matters as enforcing pandemic rules in public and best methods for protecting oneself responsibly.

Comics have a transformative power. Comics in general and graphic medicine in particular may be protean enough to enable behavioural and social change. As Patrick Chappatte, the Lebanese-Swiss cartoonist and illustrator, said in his TEDGlobal talk, *The Power of Cartoons*, in 2010, "It's a great tool of communication for bad or for good. And cartoons can cross boundaries, as you have seen. And humor is a good way, I think, to address serious issues."

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**A DAVID LEWIS (/AUTHOR/49859)** is an American graphic novel writer currently teaching at Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences in Boston. His creative works include *The Lone and Level Sands* and *Kismet, Man of Fate*. He is an editorial board member for the *International Journal of Comic Art*.

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Ministry of Health and Family Welfare(/tag/ministry-of-health-and-family-welfare)

World Health Organisation(/tag/world-health-organisation)

misinformation(/tag/misinformation)

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## READER'S COMMENTS

Anu Mary Peter  
[14 Feb, 2021](#)

Interesting and highly informative article. It rightly brings out the possibilities of the medium of comics to address the impact of pandemic on people across the globe and how in the face of an unprecedented global health crisis, a familiar medium like comics could play a crucial role in disseminating relevant information. Interesting read!

Diptarup Ghosh  
Dastidar  
[13 Feb, 2021](#)

This was an excellent read! The article establishes the role that comics have played, throughout history, to spread awareness and help people make informed responses to emergency situations - times when everyone begins to panic and believe in all sorts of superstitions! I am so glad to see the

mentions of some very interesting and less talked about artists and comics! Its not just superheroes (as born out of comics) which obstruct misinformation, but the medium of comics itself which has acted as superheroes in such dire times! I would say that these comics artists are, in this context, the superheroes and their comics art the superpowers! Very interesting article indeed that makes one think even more! Kudos to the authors!

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