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The Parallel Universe: A Review of *Webcomics*

Kleefeld, S., *Webcomics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 254 pages, 2020, ISBN 9781350028173.

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The review considers *Webcomics*, by Sean Kleefeld (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). This volume, ranging over broad themes in sections titled Historical Overview, Social and Cultural Impact, Key Texts, and Critical Uses, is an essential text in the under-studied area of webcomics. While *Webcomics* provides a fresh consideration of the form's place in digital history, historical and current works, and promoting diverse creator voices, this review maintains that an opportunity has been missed to place webcomics in the wider social and cultural context of communication and publishing. This consideration, and that of digital comics readers' 'lived experience' with webcomics, points to a gap in empirical research.



Digital self-publishing was and is a revolution. I add the ‘digital’ to underscore that there has always been self-publishing. Some of the most famous authors self-published at least initially in their careers, for example Margaret Atwood, Charles Dickens, and T.S. Eliot, to name a very few. While technology has revolutionized communication – the way we talk to each other, the way we participate, the way we create – the development of digital self-publishing has added another level of change:

Self-publishing has become a world unto itself—a parallel universe of publishing, a sprawling, uncharted territory that has expanded enormously in recent years and whose dramatic growth shows no signs of slowing down. It is part and parcel of a burgeoning domain of what could be called ‘non-traditional publishing’ (Thompson, 2021: 217).

Thompson (2021) makes the case that print publishers started from behind when it came to competing in the world of digital book publishing. Sean Kleefeld in *Webcomics* (2020) (Figure 1) makes a similar case about traditional comics publishing and its relationship to webcomics. Unlike print comics, webcomics has not had to make major changes to adapt to technology: it was born of the digital environment or revolution and has changed as it has changed. As a product of the digital self-publishing environment with a print legacy, at its outer edges if not its heart it has pushed past the traditional, through vertical comics, infinite landscape, visual formatting for social media and smartphones, game comics, hypercomics and hypertext, to name a few explorations.

The story of the intrinsic connection between the ‘snowball of revolutions’ in communication

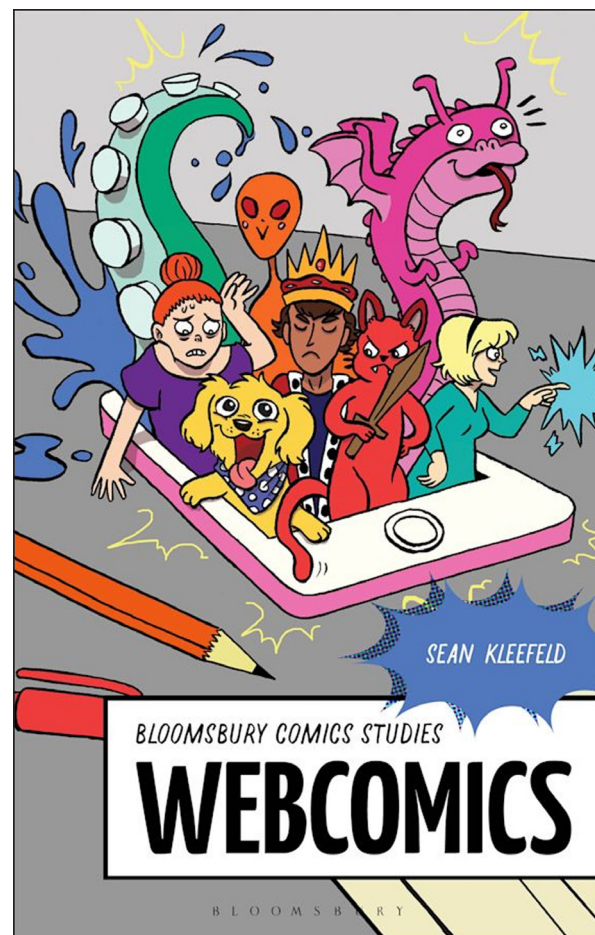


Figure 1: Cover of Sean Kleefeld's *Webcomics* (2020) © Bloomsbury Academic.

and creation – from the digital disruption of technology to self-publishing and onto webcomics – has yet to be properly studied and analyzed in comics studies (as it has for book publishing: see Thompson 2022).

We have pieces of research (see Dowthwaite et al. 2014, 2015, and 2017 on webcomic business models and social networks, for example). In *Webcomics*, we have a book-length treatment of webcomics and its place in the evolution of self-publishing, thus providing a foundation for scholarly research in this area of comics studies. Of necessity, Kleefeld's treatment is heavy on the creator's role, a pivotal role to be sure, and there are many voices recording their journeys and experiences (see the Key Texts chapter on *Dumbing of Age* by David M. Willis pp.174–180, for example). The places where the book is not so strong are not necessarily because of a failing of Kleefeld's but because of a gap in comics studies research for webcomics. He cannot cite what isn't there, not on the subject of webcomics, and not on the subject of webcomics readers.

Kleefeld is clear on the focus of the book, starting with his definition of webcomics in the Introduction. *Webcomics* ranges over the history, form and format, technology and key texts, and throughout the major focus is on creators, how they make a living and become successful, what they can do to attract an audience. The focus on creators is entirely to be expected, given the digital environment for self-publishing and what a difference it has made to comics creators. Kleefeld presents a well-rounded account of what it takes to create and sustain webcomics.

But this focus begs a question: where is the webcomics reader, not just fan, in this context? There is an opportunity here to consider the new kind of reader and reading that webcomics has essentially created, but Kleefeld does not cite scholarship on webcomics readers, nor from fan studies. This oversight is not specific to this publication; it is endemic in comic studies scholarship largely because there is very little empirical research to cite. As Benjamin Woo (2020) advises, “One way or another...we must account for the readers and audiences of comics” (p.113).

Almost in acknowledgement of the creator's enhanced role and responsibility, Kleefeld begins by identifying “two distinctions to be made with webcomics that separate them from other types of comics that happen to be distributed electronically”... also shared via the internet (p.2). These are “authorial intent” and “software used in the reader's viewing” (pp.2–3).

Kleefeld does admit that the first distinction “is inexact and inefficient at best” and to prove this goes on to offer the example of Chris Ware encountering a fan who read *Last Saturday* online when Ware had considered it a print comic (p.3). Part of my own research has included interviewing comics creators who have reacted in the same way, stating

that they did not create digital comics. All the while, their comics were readily available via Kindle, for example, and for some readers the only way they had encountered them. Kleefeld's observation is to note, "since creators and publishers may themselves have conflicting ideas on the matter, as demonstrated in the abovementioned example, that intent cannot be used exclusively as criteria" (p.3). However, he has missed out on what could arguably be the more compelling conflict in this example—the conflict between the perceptions of creator and reader with regard to the comic.

Before I expand on the webcomic reader, I do want to state emphatically that this is a necessary book, itself addressing a gap in comics studies research. This book challenges a seeming reluctance, among English-speaking scholars at any rate, to engage with webcomics as distinct from print and animation. According to Leah Misemer (2019), "available on the web and often excerpted by the visually-oriented algorithms of social media feeds, webcomics arguably have the broadest reach of any form of comics, yet they remain under-theorized". Kleefeld refers to some research on the subject, for instance, Scott McCloud's (2000) *Reinventing Comics*, Withrow and Barber (2005), as well as T. Campbell's (2005) almost 15-year-old look at the history of the form. But these are among a very few older full-length treatments (How-To Webcomic books aside) that attempt a scholarly approach. Kleefeld's book is a welcome current overview of the form which might invite future scholarly attention.

The lack of scholarship on webcomics is felt in some of the main chapters, comprising the standard organization for the most part of *Bloomsbury Comics Studies* publications (other authors in the series have adapted them somewhat): Historical Overview, Social and Cultural Impact, Key Texts, and Critical Uses. There is a difficulty with framing the various aspects of webcomics so as to fit these categories, especially where scholarship does not conform to them. The Historical Overview chapter is one that works well with the book's subject: webcomics grew up essentially alongside other internet and web developments, not quite concurrently, but not at all far behind:

It should go without saying that webcomics would not exist without the internet. Indeed, the world wide web itself would not exist without the internet, so in providing a historical overview of webcomics, it makes sense to cover the internet's basic history, leading to the development of the world wide web and, thus, webcomics (p.13).

Arguably, most scholarly historical considerations of webcomics of note were in the early 2000s (See Campbell, 2006 which Kleefeld and other scholars use as a historical reference). Kleefeld provides a necessary update to that historical background. The story of webcomics is provided with some key and conceptually interesting highlights: the

birth of the emoticon in the pre-web days of Gopher and USENET (p.18); comics offered through service providers like Seagopher (p.20); the Forward and Back embedding (p.24); the connection between gaming and webcomics (p.26); webcomics and blogging (p.31); and maybe most importantly making a living (remember micropayments?) and early crowd-funding, including Indiegogo (founded in 2008) and Kickstarter (founded in 2009) (pp.32-35). The history encapsulates a form looking for expression through a technology that itself developed in fits and starts. I do have some reservations in what is otherwise a thorough treatment: the timeline would appear to end in 2011 with the founding of the collective *Hiveworks*. There is a mention of smartphones (p.93) but what they have meant for webcomics and vertical comics, especially in the form of Webtoon (Navar Webtoon in 2004, Line Webtoon in 2014, and Webtoon in English in 2019) is a significant omission in the development and history.

Where the book's subject matter suffers from a lack of appropriate framing is in the Social and Cultural Impact and Critical Uses chapters. The subsections in Social and Cultural Impact are interesting in and of themselves, but seem a bit forced given what would be considered relevant to the section title, for example Formats and Technology: both are necessary considerations in how they serve to define and form webcomics (see p.93 on creators structuring layouts for tablet devices and smartphones). But both sections treat heavily practical and technical issues, and not so much social and cultural impacts of webcomics. Again, I think this was always going to be a difficult section to write as identifying impact requires empirical, often longitudinal, research which in the case of webcomics is just not available. The subsection that fits a little more easily within this chapter, Conflicts with Newspaper Strips (p.57+), does actually deal with the cultural fall out of the death of newspapers, a major vehicle for comics strips. Kleefeld notes that, as webcomic creators became more successful, "newspaper strip cartoonists seemed to display a fair amount of animosity toward [them]"(p.57). As newspapers continued to cut pages in an attempt to be more economically viable, comic strips, 'the funnies', were often the first on the chopping block.

The Financing subsection gives a thorough accounting of the difficulties and successes of creating and publishing webcomics, continuing the creator-focused thread started in the Historical Overview chapter and the Conflicts with Newspaper Strips subsection. It is a thread that is followed through the Key Texts and to a certain extent the Critical Uses sections.

This focus on the creator dominates the one subsection that seems to directly pertain to readers: Audience Participation. For most of this subsection, Kleefeld falls back on the language and tone that suggests more of a how-to for creators (see pp. 69-76). Kleefeld does refer to types of 'audience' participation as demonstrated on chat boards,

comments sections, and on social media, a point he picks up in the Educational/Social Causes subsection. This subsection focuses on what Will Eisner (1985, as quoted by Kleefeld) terms “attitudinal instructional comics” (p.77), otherwise known as ‘applied comics’. Kleefeld does point out that these types of comics have brought new readers:

On the web, however, geography and physical barriers are eliminated and people from anywhere in the world can meet online and develop a community centered around a webcomics theme. With under-represented groups, this can be extremely important (pp. 79-80).

I am curious as to the differentiation between ‘Social Impact’ in the chapter title and ‘Social Causes’ in the section title. It appears to be dealing with ‘cause’ not in the ‘impact’ sense, but in the ‘aim’ or ‘movement’ sense, and this may seem a minor point. However, it goes along with the impression that these chapter and subsection titles are sometimes too general and do not provide articulate framing of the content.

The webcomics offered in the Education/Social Causes subsection, for example Sophia Labelle’s *Assigned Male*, provide ample illustration of the injection of new voices into comics. However, the readers appear at a remove. Most of what we hear from readers are what creators report from their comments pages (see for example *Emphathize This*: 187). But these comments pages only reveal where the reader’s interests intersect with the creator’s. These different expectations and reactions to reading comics have not been empirically examined, not even in fan-based studies. But if comics studies is to represent all kinds of webcomics readers and reading, then more empirical research is needed.

The Key Texts chapter would never please everyone. These types of lists never do. But a persuasive list of webcomics has to contain the ‘pioneers’ so to speak, and Kleefeld’s does, for example *Girl Genius* and *Penny Arcade* (there is a connection between the gaming community and webcomics in some of these early examples). This mention of the founders or pioneers of webcomics is especially important now when some of these creators are a bit sceptical of all those now ‘jumping on the webcomic bandwagon’ since it has been proven that creators can actually make money. A rather high-spirited consideration of this view can be found at the Clownfish YouTube channel: “WEBTOON and Webcomics Accepted by the Mainstream... NOW” (2022) which supports Kleefeld’s point about traditional comic attitudes towards webcomics. Kleefeld is thorough on the subject of webcomic finances and revenue, and how at the very beginning webcomics creators were not regarded seriously because of the seeming lack of ability to make money (p.32 and the Financing section in Social and Cultural Impact chapter p.102+).

Kleefeld follows this finance (and the attending success of a webcomic) thread into the last chapter of the book, *Critical Uses*. This chapter, as with the *Social and Cultural Impact* chapter, suffers from a lack of framing, which results in it appearing to be a bit of a grab-bag. Again, it's not really the content of the subsections that can be faulted, for example Kleefeld's own discussion of the lack of webcomic scholarship in *Discussing Webcomics* subsection. In this chapter, he also engages with the financial (or lack of) aspects of webcomics, as he does in other subsections, such as *Defining Success and Success: Easier or More Difficult*. But these discussions, as others such as *Webcomics as a Genre?* and *Genres in Webcomics*, tend to be brief, general summaries of the issues involved. Moreover, it is not readily apparent what some, if not all, have to do with 'critical use', any more than it is clear what 'critical use' means in this context.

Webcomics is an essential book in that it (hopefully) refocuses the attention of comics studies on the important contribution webcomics has made to comics in general and its creators in particular. However, it inadvertently demonstrates two important, albeit neglected, areas of research: the lack of webcomics scholarship and the lack of empirical studies on webcomic readers, all types of readers, not just fans. There is a missed opportunity to reflect on the 20 years of transformative change brought by technology and how webcomics is situated within this context socially and culturally. Kleefeld highlights how webcomics has given voice to diverse creators in the *Education/Social Causes* and *Key Text* subsections, but a lack of research makes most of what is offered appear anecdotal and subjective. Essentially, webcomics exist in a parallel universe to 'real comics' until more empirical research brings it into the larger context of publishing and communication.

Competing Interest

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Editorial Note

The author is currently working on her PhD dissertation under the supervision of a team that includes the editor-in-chief of this journal. This article was externally reviewed prior to acceptance. The editorial process complied with the guidelines on ethical editing and research established by the Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE) and the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO).

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