

Scrolling, swiping, selling: Understanding Webtoons and the data-driven participatory culture around comics

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Abstract:

Comics cannot be isolated from their active audiences. Scholars have investigated the fans who attend San Diego Comic Con (Scott 2011), who draw their own manga (Lamerichs 2014), and who socialize at comic stores (Woo 2011). Despite this deep entwinement of comics with their audiences, comic studies and fan studies have developed as two different disciplines, which could work together more closely. Whereas comic studies often tend to center on the medium comics, fan scholars commonly investigate how audiences respond to a particular source-text, and remix or rewrite the story. In this article, I argue that comic books and their fandom is in a shift towards different platforms, business models and technologies. The platform economy is drastically changing the relationship between fans and creators. Through a case-study of the platform Webtoon, I demonstrate how contemporary comics and their interfaces are changing from texts to systems and business models. I argue that this changes the nature of the participatory culture around digital comics and their fandom from a bottom-up subculture to a data-driven economy.

Keywords: Fan studies, fandom, webtoons, web comics, platform economy, comic studies

Introduction

Contemporary comic book fandom is rapidly developing. One reason is that the narratives and characters of comic books are increasingly rewritten for television, games and film. The conclusion of the first phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), grossed nearly \$2.8 billion worldwide, and became the highest-grossing film of all time (Whitten 2019). Furthermore, the events and active communities around comics are flourishing. Comiket in Tokyo, for example, draws over half a million visitors each year that buy amateur comics (doujinshi) from different artists, many of them women.¹ To name a

different example, in The Netherlands alone there are around fifty different comic conventions and fairs, such as Amsterdam Comic Con, Comic Con Ahoy, and Dutch Comic Con. Additionally, different local anime conventions and European comic fairs ('stripbeurs' in Dutch) provide a podium for artists and fans to meet up.

However, comics are popular online as well, with the emergence of platforms such as DeviantArt, Smackjееves and Webtoon. Through comments and follow features, readers can directly engage with their favorite artists. Crowdfunding platforms, from Kickstarter to Patreon, also allow audiences to become investors and support their favorite comics financially. These cross-overs of fandom and comics are indicative of a changing landscape, one where texts, audiences and media are not experienced in silos, but in complex cultural systems. While this is by no means new, it should be noted that the audience in particular has become more active in the contemporary media landscape, for instance as investors and co-creators. Today, artists can monetize their content directly through fans, for instance, thereby fostering a more fan-driven economy.

While fans and comics are closely connected culturally and economically, the disciplines that these subjects are largely in their own silo. Comic studies can be understood as a more textual discipline, involved the study of the medium and its texts, while fan studies emphasizes reception, active audiences and subcultures (Perren and Felschow 2018). While these fields developed differently, the subjects that fan and comic scholars study grow closer each day. New media have erased the traditional boundaries between production and consumption, and given rise to the 'prosumer' who combines these activities (Toffler 1989). This figure, of which fans are a key example, has pushed scholars of popular culture, audiences and media to rethink their frameworks (Bruns 2008; Jenkins 2006; Uricchio 2004). In other words, comic and fan studies could profit from each other's outlook and concepts, especially in the context of platforms and cultural production. More can be done to put these works in conversation.

I advocate for an interdisciplinary media studies approach to studying comics and their audiences. Overall, I define this as an approach to media studies that is collaborative, systemic and connects both audiences and texts. This approach is inspired by digital media studies, and for instance includes theories and methodologies that scrutinize data, participation and content critically in a time of platforms and new media. We need to move beyond concepts that are based on mass media, broadcasting and channels these days, and towards experiences, systems and cultures.

The purpose of this study is to give an overview of new platforms and their possibilities for comic production and consumption. Comics are in a shift towards new forms of expression, connection and interaction between artists, readers and other actors. In these new business models, comic artist can make money from their creative content and their interaction with the fan community. I analyze the platform Webtoon, which is indicative of how the relationship between comic artists and their fans is changing. As a new genre of comics, 'webtoons' rely heavily on platforms like Webtoon and Tapas. These

comics, which originate from South-Korea, consist of a vertical scroll that can easily be navigated on mobile phones, tablets and laptops.

Ultimately, new technologies enable a data-driven and economic participatory culture between comic creators and their fans. Platforms are radically changing the democratic, bottom-up participatory culture of fandom (Jenkins 2006), and comic culture specifically. I argue that the participation, data, and content by artists and fans becomes a resource in the platform economy, thereby changing participatory culture fundamentally.

Platformization of Fandom

This study combines fan studies and comics studies scholarship with a qualitative approach to platform studies (van Dijck 2013). Typical platform examples are social media networking sites such as Facebook, streaming services such as Netflix and Spotify, but also the service-oriented applications of Uber, AirBnB and Booking.com. Platforms are best understood as socio-technical assemblages that facilitate different communities, and act as mediators and gatekeepers of content (Gillespie 2018). They have also been described as commodities that are ‘malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation’ (Nieborg, Poell, and Deuze 2019, 85).

Contemporary platforms are changing the nature of online communication – a shift that scholars have described as ‘platformization,’ or ‘the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and its consequences, in its historical context’ (Helmond 2015, n.p.). Other scholars described it as the ‘penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of media industries and production practices’ (Nieborg, Poell, and Deuze 2019, 85).

These technologies are not neutral, and creative producers are increasingly dependent on them. Platforms may be designed with certain criteria in mind, but they are socially constructed and their affordances, including their algorithmic design, give yield to complex user cultures (van Dijck 2013). Platforms are relational, and should be understood as complex systems that are embedded in social and economic contexts. As Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018, 8) write: ‘Platforms cannot be studied in isolation, apart from social and political structures, as they are all (inter)dependent on a global infrastructure that has been built steadily from the early 2000s onward.’ These systems are more than service models that provide peer-to-peer interaction and user-generated content, and raise questions of moderation, monetization, free speech and public values (Noble 2018).

At the heart of these business models is data. Personalized advertisements, selling specific data to third-parties, and tracking users are common ways to make a profit from platforms. Understood from this perspective, platforms are more than channels, and have the potential to create entirely new business models that mix online and offline spaces. They facilitate opportunities for sharing, also known as the ‘sharing economy’ (Bozek 2018), and for short-term freelance jobs within the ‘gig economy’ (Kessler 2018). Platforms in this sense can also be understood as business models around data, content and services that

have profound socio-economic effects, which have been conceptualized as ‘platform economy’ (Steinberg 2019), ‘platform capitalism’ (Srnicek 2016) and even ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff 2019). These concepts frame how platforms of Amazon, Google, Uber and Kickstarter are profiting from the data and participation of their users, and drastically change labor relationships and investments.

Most notably, the labor of fans and users becomes a commodity on platforms, which can also be monetized by the users on certain conditions (e.g. through advertising revenue). The industry profits from fans, including the platforms as third-parties that offer services to these users (Stanfill 2019). This has also been captured as a shift from a one-sided market to a two-sided market with ‘strong winner-take-all effects affecting all sides in platform markets’ (Nieborg, Poell, and Deuze 2019, 90). This market principle explains how the accounts and content that are the most popular keep growing, and eventually become the most lucrative.

At the heart of these models is a new way of managing and facilitating work through the use of data and algorithms. Different studies have emphasized how platforms and their algorithms can also amplify social biases and contribute to greater inequality, for instance in terms of income, race and gender (Eubanks 2018; Noble 2018; O’Neil 2016). In her critical study of search engines, Safiya Noble draws attention to the social consequences of algorithms and platforms (Noble 2018). Her results show how platforms, driven by algorithms, reproduce social inequalities but take no ownership over these issues. Noble (2018, 6) writes:

Digital media platforms are resoundingly characterized as ‘neutral technologies’ in the public domain and often, unfortunately, in academia. Stories of ‘glitches’ found in systems do not suggest that the organizing logics of the web could be broken but, rather, that these are occasional one-off moments when something goes terribly wrong with near- perfect systems.

The ways in which platforms order and categorize information can have dramatic results, but is framed as a just a bug in the technology, an anomaly rather than a systemic design problem. Based on this scholarship, it is important to acknowledge that starry-eyed approaches to technology, also known as ‘technochauvinism’ (Broussard 2019), should be avoided.

However, the rise of platformization has also given range to data-savvy users, who have a high degree of algorithmic literacy. They are aware of the pitfalls of platforms, and also adopt tactics to effectively mobilize hashtags, recommendation algorithms and advertisements among others. Such users have also been described as ‘data fans,’ who ‘adopt individual and collective strategies to influence metric and semantic information reported on digital platforms and social media’ (Zhang and Negus 2020, 493). By focusing on avid fans of K-pop (self-identified as ‘stans’), the scholars show how fans can also

manipulate algorithms to provide more engagement for their favorite idols. It should be noted that in the summer of 2020, K-pop stans and TikTok users also mobilized these tactics to sabotage a Trump rally, by reserving countless of tickets to make sure that the turn-out for the rally would be low (Andrews 2020).

To summarize, platforms give range to complex user and fan activities. These systems cannot be studied without social context. Platforms are not merely communication tools for fans, and do not necessarily have positive, lasting impact on social relations and lived experiences. The paradigm of platforms as a tool for connectivity and participation requires scrutiny as we move away from bottom-up, self-organized participatory cultures (Jenkins 2006) into the domain of platforms as business models.

Comics as a Data-Driven Participatory Culture

With the emergence of platforms, a new type of participatory culture is taking shape that can be compared to its earlier, bottom-up version in digital fandom (Jenkins 2006; Booth 2017). This type of data-driven participatory culture is top-down, data-driven and potentially leads to greater inequalities by its automation of data.

The creative industries, including the comic book industry, are not exempt from these changes. Platforms have impact on comic production, distribution and reception. This erodes the false binary in scholarship between the industry and audiences. In a study which connects fans, publishing and comic book creators, Perren and Felschow (2018, 317) note that our fields need to 'move beyond top-down political economic/bottom-up cultural studies approaches that tend to reify fandom as oppositional to industry.' Fandom is not counter-cultural, subversive, or detached from the creative industries, but an integral part of it.

In the current platform economy, these questions about labor surface even more. Who profits from whom in these new ecosystems? How are these new labor relationships formed, and what exactly is being commodified, and how? Platforms change the labor divisions in comics, for instance between fans and creators. These changes are part of a wider landscape, where it is also increasingly common for fans to support artists directly. Tools such as Patreon give range to entirely new business models through crowdfunding (Bennett, Chin, and Jones 2015).

Paul Booth has described this as a digital fandom 2.0, which is essentially a 'mash-up of the gift and market economies' (Booth 2017, 195). He describes this economy as a 'digi-gratis economy' in which the labor of fans is free ('gratis'), and is harnessed at the expense of user efforts and labor. A small webcomic on Smackjееves, for instance, is not easily monetized by a creator, but the views, clicks and likes by its audience are monetized by the platform itself, creating an uneven economy where creatives and fans engage in free labor.

This economy operates not only as a hybrid of the gift/market economy, but is commonly constructed as a 'regift economy' (Scott 2009). While Suzanne Scott applied this concept to the early social media productively, this concept becomes even more pertinent in the platform economy. User-generated content is not only profited from on platforms, it

is sold back to us through advertisements, pay-walls, and other modalities. Moreover, that behavior is tracked and traced as well, leading to models which profit from every step and piece of data that users leave in these systems. These changes amount into what I would describe as a ‘data-driven participatory culture,’ which is examined in this study through different comic book platforms.

This data-driven participatory culture around comics is structured around attention, as studied by Leah Misemer (2019). She notes the attention economy around webcomics in detail, a culture of click and likes that are monetized particularly by third-parties, and not necessarily by artists. This economy fundamentally changing labor relationships: ‘When the economics of authorship shift from those of one based on material goods to the attention economy of the internet, relationships develop the quality of cooperative competition’ (Misemer 2019, n.p.). On online platforms, artists compete for the scarce time and attention of their readers. In the case of webcomics, each click and view matters, and can potentially lead to monetization of comics. This culture is a vastly different one than the printed culture around comics, structured around other hierarchies such as publishing houses.

Depending on the platform, the business models around a comics change, but also the interaction and form of that comic. As Anastasia Salter (2020, n.p.) writes: ‘Formal transformation is also a consequence of changing platforms: Instagram lends itself to square comics; Tumblr to narrow, long-form work; and many platforms support GIF animations and other born-digital approaches to comics art.’ New interfaces are changing how comics are created, experienced and understood by their audiences. Comics innovation, in that sense, is not only a matter of individual styles and creativity, but cannot be separated from these technological possibilities.

Figure 1: Points of attention for the analysis of Webtoon

Levels	Points of attention
<i>Textual</i>	Aesthetic, style, materiality of comic
<i>Relational</i>	Interaction fan/creator, affordances of the platform (e.g. clicks, likes), co-creation between artists and fans
<i>Technological</i>	Platforms, emerging technologies, data and UGC
<i>Economic</i>	Business models, investors, crowdfunding, attention economy

When critically applied to comics fandom, these concepts imply a particular approach that connects platform studies, fan studies and comic studies. This requires analyzing the platform on several dimensions. Firstly, the platform and interface impacts the form of the comic and its aesthetics. Secondly, it needs to be explored as a system where fans, creators and other stakeholders are closely connected and interact in virtual spaces. Finally, the technological possibilities of the platform should be considered as well as its business model.

These changes lead to the construction of a particular platform fandom (see also Morris 2018) around comics. To analyze this phenomenon, combinations of comic and fan

studies are needed, which amount into a more integral, systemic, interdisciplinary approach to media studies. This study focuses on the platform Webtoon to demonstrate this approach, by analyzing different layers of the platform (see **Figure 1**).

Webtoons and Comics Innovation

The rise of new platforms has changed comic production and consumption. An example of these innovations is the emerging genre of webtoons. As a format and genre, webtoons originate from South-Korea, and usually consist of one image or vertical scroll to make reading on mobile phones, tablets and laptops more accessible. Today, webtoons are characterized primarily by their vertical layout with scrolling and are usually in color, as opposed to many printed comics and manga ('manwa') in South-Korea. Accessible platforms helped popularize the genres, and in particular Daum Toon (2003) and Naver Webtoon (2004) were crucial in this development in South-Korea.

While these comics were accessible only in Korean for a long time, the same services also opened up to English-language readers and artists. In July 2014, Naver subsidiary Line began publication of translations of popular Webtoons to English via the Line Webtoon service, now known as Webtoon. Daum, meanwhile, partnered with Tapas Media in 2012, and launched tapas.io (Ji-young 2016). Increasingly, the genre of webtoons became a global phenomenon through hits such as *Lore Olympus* (2018-ongoing) by Rachel Smythe. This revision of the Hades and Persephone myth is one of their highest-ranking comics with a 9.79 (31-03-2020), and Webtoon is currently collaborating with The Jim Henson Company on an animated adaptation (Boucher 2019).

The interface – long vertical scrolls, catered to mobile devices – set webtoons apart from other digital comics. Part of the reason why these comics are so popular today is their accessibility – they easy to scroll through on different devices. For one, they are more form-fitting than other webcomics which still mimic printed pages. Many digital comics still remediate stylistic devices of print, most particularly the 'comics grid,' or the structure and sequencing through panels. A platform such as Webtoon radically breaks with panels. In this format, comics are vertical images that they are scrolled, turned into pixels and code, and become a fundamentally different interface with reader options. The fact that the interface is purposeful and fits one image at a time creates a new dynamic. One where each individual image is authentic and single illustration that demands our attention. This changes the characteristics of comics, and this newly found materiality of digital comics can be interpreted as a more radical, mainstream innovation.

The shift to vertical orientation in webtoons impacts both artists and readers, and has implications for the flow and reading experience. Rather than working with size and horizontal reading directions, a webtoon is always characterized by its vertical reading. Variation comes from the content itself (e.g. a close-up on an image) rather than compartmentalization. Like in the traditional paper-based grids, the scrolling and sequence of images provides timing and flow. This does not change in the webtoon format and one could even argue that the interface (e.g. tablet, mobile phone) creates a frame similar as

paper once did, resulting in a single-image grid which we are also common in traditional comics and illustrations. The interface then becomes a new ‘meta-panel’ that artists reflect upon and experiment with (Eisner 1985, 45), similar to the page. The tactile scrolling and zooming of webtoons brings to mind McCloud’s (2000, 220–29) ‘infinite canvas.’ McCloud envisions possibilities for digital comics to break free from traditional gutters and paneling, arguing that the screen has potential as an infinite canvas that artists can explore.

Navigation has a different role in webtoons compared to other forms of comics. The movement – scrolling, clicking – change the timing of the comic and the way that it is consumed. Since webtoons depend on movements that go beyond flipping the pages and clicking, they can be understood as having performative qualities. The continuous scrolling creates a sense of timing determined by the reader. This can be contrasted to traditional comics, timing is determined partly by the sequences and size of panels as well as the gutter (McCloud 1994, 98–99). Many webcomics still incorporate these formal qualities of print (Baudry 2018) but webtoons radically break with this way of ‘remediating’ (Bolter and Grusin 1999) comics. However, their approach should not be seen as a completely innovative paradigm either since they often borrow ideas from animation, such as transitions, flows and incorporation of sound and music. In this sense, webtoons remediate cartoons by literally ‘animating’ the flow of images through the reader’s use of swiping.

Figure 2: Affordances of Webtoon

Print	Webtoon platform
Flipping pages	Scrolling
Horizontal navigation	Vertical navigation
Comic grid (e.g. gutters, panels)	Single images
Different publishing strategies	Seriality, episodes
Reader activity not visible	Comments, likes and followers

Beyond their formal characteristics, webtoons have specific publishing strategies as well. Seriality in particular is key for their success. Artists on Tapas or Webtoon upload new chapters regularly (purposely called ‘episodes’ in both platforms), and readers can choose to binge several chapters in one sitting. Jason Serafino (2015) aptly names tapas.io ‘The YouTube of Comics’ in *Tech Times*, not only because of their seriality but also because of their business model: ‘Like YouTube, writers and artists can upload their comics quickly and easily on Tapastic and retain ownership of whatever they post. Creators are also entitled to ad revenue from Tapastic, depending on the readership they bring in’ (Serafino 2015, n.p.). This seriality also enables particular consumer practices, such as the rise of ‘bingewatching’ the comics entirely. By purposefully publishing comics as short episodes, webtoons become a story that readers can follow and tune in with each week.

Finally, interaction is part of the webtoon experience. In lively comment sections, fans share their thoughts, theories and critiques. Since the comments are directly

embedded under the comics, they become part of the same interface, rather than a separate reader experience.

***The Shadow Prophet* and Insights into Webtoon Production**

To gain more insights in the creator perspective of Webtoon, I interviewed Marissa Delbressine, artist of the Webtoon's original *The Shadow Prophet* (Delbressine and Delseit 2020). This comic was first conceived of in print, but was repurposed for the platform. The *Shadow Prophet* takes place in a dystopian society, where citizens are actively tracked and controlled by the mysterious cult leader Godo. Failure is not tolerated. When main character Itsuou fails her high school exam, she becomes a social pariah who slowly unravels the truth behind Godo's seemingly perfect regime.

Reworking the comic for Webtoon took considerable effort from the team behind *The Shadow Prophet*. Due to the new format, Delbressine had to revise her paneling, and think of new ways to implement the vertical scroll most effectively. Below you see a dramatic scene in which the main character Itsuou has a panic attack after she fails her final exams, and metaphorically drowns. The difference in paneling for the graphic novel (work in progress, **Figure 2**) and final paneling for Webtoon (**Figure 3**) is striking. In the latter, Delbressine has created a long scroll in which Itsuou drowns that takes the reader at least several seconds to navigate and read, thereby creating a sense of space and timing.

The vertical interface of the Webtoon platform brings a different type of storytelling and evokes emotional response. In the interview for this study, Marissa Delbressine emphasizes: 'It's beautiful to work with the panel flow. It works very well for emotional moments, like the panic attack. Since that scene is a mix of thoughts and feelings, it is beautiful to let go of the grid and let everything flow' (April 1, 2020, translated from Dutch). Delbressine works with this flow a lot, not just in the scene she mentions (a part of which you see in figure 2), but also in other chapters. She describes a scene in episode 10, for instance: '[The vertical scroll] is great for atmosphere, for instance when Vero walks across the subway tracks. In a book such a long winding track is not interesting, but when you are scrolling it is a great way to take readers along a road, and towards a new scene' (April 1, 2020, translated from Dutch). As explained in this quote, the scrolling format is an aesthetic in its own right that can be used in many ways to direct the reader and create a sense of space.

However, the seriality of Webtoon, and its particular panel count, can put pressure on creators. Marissa Delbressine explains:

The panel count can be very limiting because what you can draw in a week is limited, and you have to look for a strong cliffhanger that allows you to reproduce art. Or you have to produce very cleverly – creating complex locations that add to a story is not feasible, or you have to envision practical solutions to draw them efficiently. These limitations raise resistance with me and other creators. (April 1, 2020, translated from Dutch)

In this quote Delbressine draws attention to the long form of the comics, which are 40 panels each at least for the English version of the platform, and the pressure that the weekly model puts on artists. The minimum amount of panels for creators of Webtoon Originals depends on the contract. Comic creators become content providers for the platform, and have to maintain their fandom actively. This sometimes means doing concessions in terms of art, and finding more efficient ways to keep producing content. In this sense, it is not only the effort of readers and fans that is reduced to user-generated content on the platform, but also the art of creators.

The format for creators also has additional features for those who create original comics under contract ('Originals'). This side of the platform supports animated GIFs and music, which are not yet available for general user interface, called 'Canvas' (WEBTOON 2019). An original comic that makes use of the multimedia options in Webtoon is *Brothers Bond* (2019), which opens with a lush cinematic war setting, in the middle of a battle. Ominous music and sound effect support key scenes, such as a demon introducing himself to the main character. Similar to a film or cartoon, the first chapter unfolds. The creators of *The Shadow Prophet* have not experimented with this feature yet, though they did receive a high-quality musical homage from a fan that they consider incorporating in the comic.

Understood from a creator's perspective, Webtoon is a highly specific interface that requires creators to submit images of forty panels, in a specific quality, and in a certain order. The format of comics on Webtoon can hardly be customized, because the platform is tailor-made to fit different devices and specific formats. An artist depends on the vertical format, and cannot suddenly integrate horizontal or diagonal movements in a Webtoon comic. Within this vertical format, however, artists can experiment.

The Business Model of Webtoon

Firmly embedded in the platform economy, Webtoon creates an immediate, real-time economy where everything can be viewed, scrolled, liked, tracked and takes place on demand (Walker-Smith 2016). Similar to Netflix, Spotify, Facebook and Twitter, readers and consumers move to the platform for specific content and entertainment. This creates a new attention economy of engagement around clicks and likes – data which can be monetized by companies, for instance by reselling it, or pairing it with advertisements. This business model is not restricted to platforms, and Leah Misemer (2019, n.p.) even sees this attention economy as a quality and opportunity of webcomics in general.

Another way of monetizing webcomics is through crowdfunding on platforms like Patreon or Kofi. For many artists, this is an opportunity to get money directly, and without heavy fees. However, a platform like Webtoon pushes this business model further for users of their Canvas tool. They can earn extra credits through the Creator Rewards Program (formerly Beta Creator Credit) which offers monetary support. Credits are paid directly to an artist's Patreon, thereby creating an intimate relationship between the popular

crowdfunding platform and the comics platform. Together, these services form a new comics ecosystem for artists and readers.

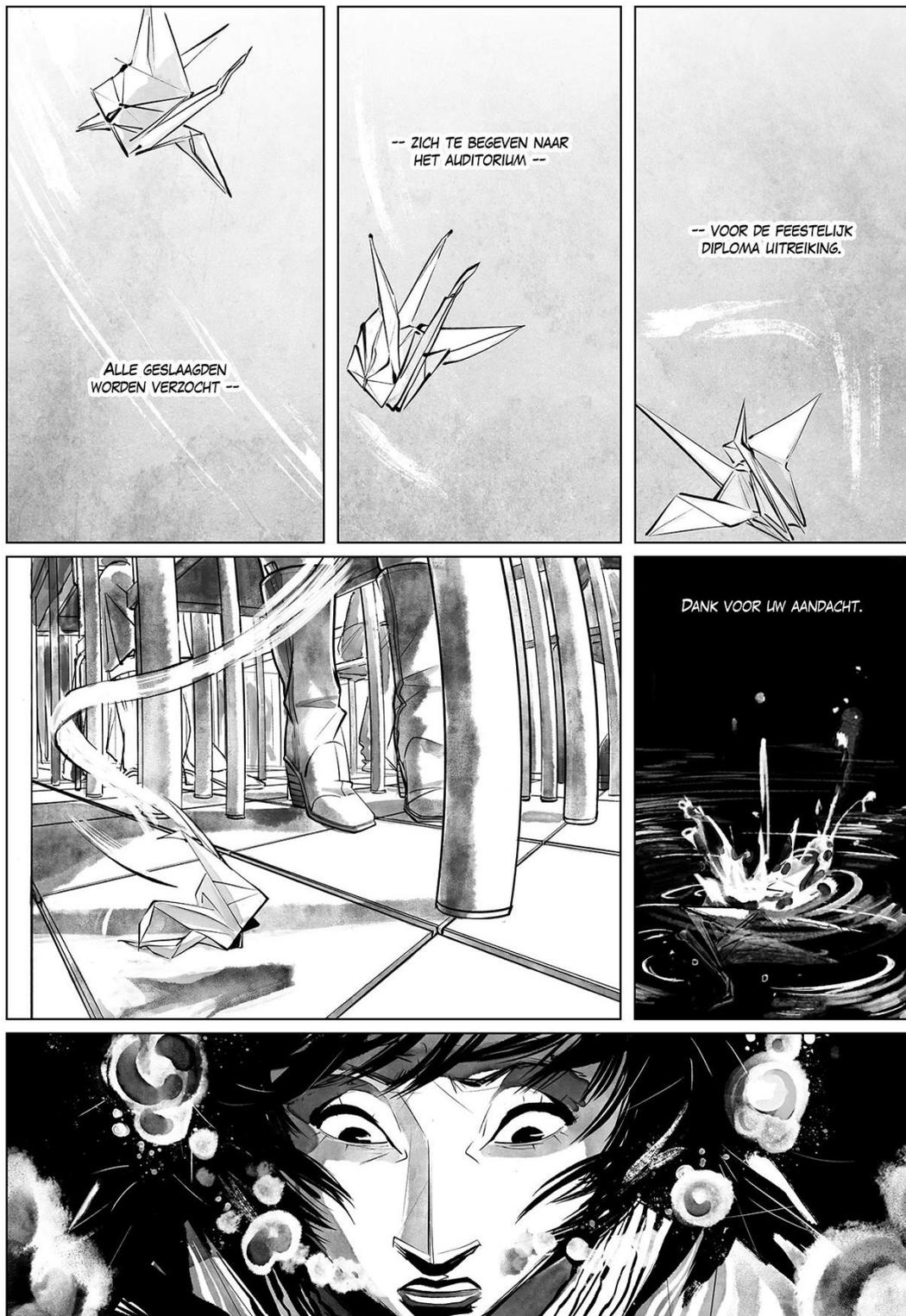


Figure 2: *The Shadow Prophet* test page for print (Delbressine and Delseit 2018)



Figure 3: Scroll of *The Shadow Prophet* (Delbressine and Delseit 2020) on Webtoon

Furthermore, creators can monetize their content through the advertisement program known as Ad Revenue Sharing Program (WEBTOON 2019). Though Webtoon is a global platform, it should be noticed that it only counts US views for monetization, a feature that is often criticized by artists. These views determine the tier that an artist is in (see **Figure 4**).

TIER AND PV	REWARDS
BRONZE TIER PV: 40,000	\$100 Credit
SILVER TIER PV: 200,000	\$300 Credit
GOLD TIER PV: 600,000	\$800 Credit
PLATINUM TIER PV: 1,500,000	\$1,000 Credit

Figure 4: Webtoon (2019) tiers for Canvas artists

Additionally, readers can support artists by paying for specific content early by purchasing and earning ‘coins’ (Webtoon’s own virtual currency). With these readers can buy fast passes for Webtoon Originals which provide early access to specific content. In principle, this means that readers can consume content three weeks before it goes live, and become early adopters and investors. This feature allows them to directly support an artist, but also has a plus for them as dedicated fans who have access to this cultural capital earlier than other fans. While fans become investors in this mode, this option must not be mistaken for a typical donation button, but acts like a paywall. This also implies that only particular fans, who have resources to spend, have access to this content. In a sense, this feature creates new cultural hierarchies in comic consumption.

Moreover, the fast pass is not disconnected from status on the platform itself. Comments have an important function on Webtoon to allow fans to interact and show appreciation. They are divided in top comments and newest comments. Especially top comments are a form of status and subcultural capital among the readers, and can be compared to popular posts on other platforms. The top comments cannot be separated from fast passes for most comics. For instance, if readers want to be the first to comment on an Original comic, they need to have a fast pass that grants early access and allows them to be one of the first to comment. ‘Readers experience it as a great honor to get a top comment,’ Marissa Delbressine explains. ‘It leads to visibility and becomes a status symbol on the platform. You get a lot of responses, and have more chance of being “seen” by the creator of a Webtoon.’

To monetize on finished comics, Webtoon also launched a daily pass which allows readers to unlock older episodes. Ideally, an eager reader then spends coins on the paywalled episodes to read more of the comic in one go. This allows the artists and Webtoon to still make extra revenue on older comics. Webtoon even frames this as a similar

practice to binge-watching in their statement: ‘If you can't wait until tomorrow, you can binge the entire series by unlocking episodes with Coins.’

To monetize user-generated content on these social media, artists need to create links to external platforms such as their own web shops, Patreon and Kofi. This is fundamentally different on platforms such as Webtoon, where revenue and support is embedded and encouraged in the interface itself through premium options and advertisements. This offers a more interactive form of online entertainment while also allowing artists to monetize their craft, which is integral to data-driven participatory culture. In that sense, Webtoon is similar to platforms like YouTube, Twitch and Wattpad, which offers ways to monetize user-generated content and engagement within the platform itself.

Through these different options, Webtoon creates a datafied economy and culture around comics. Webtoon fundamentally changes participatory culture through its data-driven, episodic and interactive approach. However, the actual interaction with fans is mostly confined to comment boxes below the comics. For personal announcements or initiatives, creators often have to use other platforms. Dutch creator Coco Ouwerkerk of the popular comic *Acception* for instance launched a contest on her Instagram where fans drew outfits for her Webtoon character Arcus (Colourbee4, 17 July 2020). The before-mentioned Marissa Delbressine and Anne Delseit regularly appear in YouTube Live sessions or podcasts to talk about *The Shadow Prophet* in more detail. A cross-platform approach is needed for creators to engage with their audiences, and to market their comics in general. Webtoon itself offers little space for such initiatives, since it is primarily structured around the comics themselves.

While Webtoon allows to monetize their craft, the business model should not be overestimated. Before creators actually reach a lucrative tier, they need a substantial amount of US views, which is not favorable for local comic creators. Moreover, the seriality of Webtoon can also work against creators, who need to produce 40 panels each week and gain a dedicated audience in a highly competitive space. For creators who crave for a degree of artistic freedom and experimentation, these conventions might not be productive.

Figure 5: Summary of results

Levels	Webtoon’s platform qualities
<i>Textual</i>	Scrolls, no gutter, vertical navigation, episodic, multi-modal
<i>Relational</i>	Interaction through comment sections on the platform, extended through other platforms
<i>Technological</i>	Specific format required for creators. Multi-modal options (e.g. music). Engagement algorithm (views and likes) ranks the most popular comics
<i>Economic</i>	Premium model with paywall (fast pass, purchased via virtual currency), Webtoons Originals under contract, advertising revenue via tiers

Implications of Data-Driven Participation

The emergence of data-driven tools and interfaces has changed the production and consumption of media content. The rise of data-driven participation is changing fandom fundamentally. What used to be a bottom-up culture, is now a drastically changing landscape, where monetization of engagement and data is key. This platformization has several consequences in terms of cultural production and consumption.

First, metrics are essential in the new participatory culture. Views, comments and likes make sure that the most popular comics are trending, and that others are forgotten. While publishing houses used to be the gate-keepers in comic culture, it seems that increasingly that role is shifting to algorithms that make the most popular content visible.

Second, attention and liveness are important resources in a data-driven fandom. Webtoon, for example, is structured in many ways more like the Netflix of comics than the YouTube of comics. Scheduling of when content goes live is essential on this platform. Original artists have dedicated time slots in which their material is published, creating a specific experience for fans who log in accordingly. This element of ‘liveness,’ often associated with broadcast culture and events, is important for platforms, and must not be overlooked. The web has a wider reach and immediacy, and has given range to a ‘just-in-time fandom’ (Hills 2002, 178). In this type of social media-driven fandom, being the first to find new information and content becomes a form of subcultural capital. Competition over platform features and metrics (e.g. posting the first comment) is common. In the case of Webtoon, the role of liveness is even more crucial, since the premium model is structured around early access for dedicated fans who can consume content even before it goes ‘live.’

Third, the turn to data-driven participatory culture has effects for fans themselves and their identity. In this kind of digital fandom, identity is grounded in textual communication and metrics, rather than offline events and material culture. This type of culture is closely connected to consuming the text, and the fandom can even take place alongside a comic, as in the case of Webtoon. This implies a shift to new forms of affective reception, ingrained in attention, clicks, likes and other qualities. Overall, affect is increasingly quantified on these platforms, as Massumi also notes in his *99 Thesis on the Revaluation of Value* (Massumi 2018). His work is a critique of this quantification, and also searches for solutions to bring quality and intensity back to online platforms. Such critical thoughts, which reflect on the implications of a purely data-driven economy and media culture, are much needed today.

These considerations also imply that a new approach to scholarship is needed. Media studies needs to develop into an interdisciplinary, data-driven discipline with a high degree of critical thinking. Considering the ethics and social consequences of these technologies is also fundamental. In a new data-driven participatory culture, for instance, which actors participate and how? Should the algorithm be read more closely as an actor in these systems, for instance? What are the ethical consequences, and the consequences for the shared capital and culture of fans? The socio-economic context needs to be taken into account as well. Some content is monetized and funded, and other content is made by

artists who are largely performing invisible, precarious labor. How can different texts be analyzed in relation to the different forms of digital labor and production styles?

These difficult questions need to be answered, but require a collaborative approach. New combinations between media studies, digital humanities and domains like fan studies are needed to move the discipline forward. This also has effect for comic studies, which should not only focus on texts, representations and signs, but contextualize comics and their reception fully. The rise of digital comics and their data fans, then, is just one example of how media culture is changing, and how our thinking need to adjust accordingly.

Conclusion

Due to new platforms, comic and fan studies are closer now than ever before. Both fields are driven by discourses, interfaces, visuals and material culture. Both disciplines interrogate creative practices in detail. Characters, audiences and aesthetics are ways of connecting these disciplines, and to move forward together, media themselves are central players. Contemporary media are not just print or broadcasting, but also the increasingly customized and privatized platforms that have user engagement and data as their core business.

The creative economy is changing, and comics fandom can act as an example of this wider shift. New interfaces, technologies and platforms creative innovation, which in turn affect the relationship between fan and artist, between artist and technology, between technology and business model. The case-study of Webtoon showed how new interfaces and ecosystems are emerging that shape the form of comics, as well as the interactions with their readers.

Critically, this also means that participatory culture is changing. These systems offer new ways of generating value and money out of comics that also allow amateurs to professionalize beyond the gift economy of sharing and recommending. Webtoon offers independent artists a way to monetize their craft, but only if they are in a high tier. An artist has to keep producing on a high level and draw engagement (e.g. clicks, comments) to get something in return. Content and data are commodified in these new kinds of participatory cultures, which have to be analyzed in radically different ways.

Thus, digital and economic innovations also require academic innovation. This means revising theories, concepts and approaches to fit a more complex digital age. We entered a new phase in media studies of platforms and business models. Collaboration across disciplines is needed to unpack these difficult issues – an interdisciplinary media studies, where fields like fan studies and comics studies connect. Such an approach needs to be future-proof above all. As a field, media studies needs to stay relevant and focus on larger trends in entertainment, the platform economy and its wide-ranging implications for participatory culture.

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Note:

¹ More background information on Comiket and its attendance can be found on this information page: https://www.comiket.co.jp/info-a/TAFO/C96TAFO/cmkkfor_eng.html.