Unsurprisingly, some of the most important and interesting work in graphic medicine in 2020 related to the coronavirus pandemic. The sheer volume of comics-based material related to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is immense and growing daily. For this reason we focus on web-based COVID-19 comics rather than individual book publications as we have done in past year-end reviews and group some of the more notable efforts into emergent categories of instructional, personal stories, and therapeutic comics, highlighting some of the most interesting exemplars in each category.

Figure 1. Creativity in Captivity

Published with permission from Gemma Correll.
Instructional Comics
Comics are particularly well-suited to visually explaining complex processes and to harnessing narratives for behavioral change. In the COVID-19 era comics have served the instrumental purpose of explaining complex information and visually presenting public health advice.

Early in the pandemic, various artists created comics that introduced the novel virus to the public, showing how it’s transmitted and what people can do to protect themselves. These ranged from comics geared toward children to highly sophisticated explanations. One particularly illuminating example is Argha Manna’s beautifully illustrated “Be Aware of Droplets and Bubbles!” Manna created this comic during strict lockdown in India, basing it on highly technical research from MIT’s fluid dynamics lab. Manna’s drawings are both informative and entertaining, showing what happens at the microscopic level when viral particles are discharged via a cough or sneeze and incorporated into a bursting fluid bubble. Manna further scales the drawings to show the human toll the virus takes when people do not heed commonsense recommendations regarding coughing, sneezing, and spitting. Like many of the best comics, this one transports readers into another world through visual imagery, teaching us about fluid dynamics and contagion along the way.

Another comic, The Side Eye by Toby Morris and Siouxsie Wiles, uses static images and .gif animation to show how the virus replicates and spreads, employing visual metaphors to connect viral replication on the micro level with transmission at the macro level. By scaling up and down and using selective colors, the authors explain the epidemiology of the pandemic, showing the impact one person’s infection can have on an entire population.

Knowledge about how the virus has spread is reflected by the changing tenor and focus of COVID-19 comics. Early informational comics centered on questions such as the meaning of “flattening the curve,” viral transmission, and self-protection. More recent comics address specific aspects of the disease such as pandemic modeling or the impact on particular subpopulations.

Personal Stories
Comics are also helping to document the vast range of lived experience during the pandemic, including the absurdity of life in social isolation. Gemma Correll, for example, in her “Creativity in Captivity” comic, uses split panels to contrast what I think I’ll do during the ‘shelter-in-place’ order vs what I’m actually doing (Figure 1). While funny, her scenarios verge on a kind of hysteria, hinting at the disorienting limbo brought...
on by the disruption in routines that we previously took for granted. The sense of teetering on the edge of despair is present in many of her comics—increasingly so as the months wear on. In “Save it for a Rainy Year,” readers are invited to use crayons with names like “viral particulate green” to color in images of “unhealthy coping mechanisms”; the comic concludes with a dark circle, labeled “the void,” into which the reader is invited to scream. Correll gives voice to the anxiety so many of us are experiencing and mitigates it with humor.

The deadly reality of the pandemic has been captured by graphic journalists, who combine reportage and the comics medium to document real-life stories. A notable example has been the series “In/Vulnerable: Inequity in the Time of Pandemic,” a collaboration between the Center for Investigative Reporting and The Nib, illustrated by Thi Bui. This series translates interviews with people from all walks of life, living across America, into graphic snapshots of the ways COVID-19 has affected individuals, and it reveals the fragility of our institutions. For example, the story of Dr Rajnish Jaiswal, an emergency physician, questions what it will take to process the experiences of frontline workers as he and his colleagues fall ill while trying to help an overwhelming influx of patients. Douglas Hawkins, a funeral director, asks what effect social distancing measures will have on the grieving process. Tawanda Jones, a teacher, weighs the threat of COVID-19 against the call to protest the simultaneous scourge of anti-Black racism. Each comic uses a unique monochromatic hue; together, they form a multicolored quilt that reflects the diversity of people’s experiences (Figure 2).

**Comics as Therapy**

A final category is the use of comics-making for therapeutic purposes. Many people have turned to comics-making as a way to combat the stress, anxiety, and isolation during the pandemic via online drawing sessions and the publication of reflective activities. The Graphic Medicine International Collective, for example, has hosted regular “Drawing Together” sessions in which participants are guided through live participatory exercises that use comics as a vehicle for self-reflection, coping, and community building. Moreover, The New York Times has featured a regular “Diary Project” in which comic artists sometimes provide prompts to readers in the form of drawing/writing exercises. Anders Nilsen, for example, depicts his own experience and offers a drawing activity for “wrapping our heads around something this big.” These participatory uses of comics have expanded the medium from one of passive consumption to collaborative, therapeutic production.

In this extraordinary year, comics have helped us to understand, express, and process our collective experience with an unprecedented global health crisis. Many of these comics can be found on the Graphic Medicine website, and more are appearing each week. As the pandemic advances, we are fortunate to have such a rich and nuanced visual documentation of this borderless disease.

**Additional Information:** The online and PDF versions of this essay contain embedded hyperlinks to the featured comics.


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