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ACTIVITY Campaign Finance, Dark Money, and Comics Journalism

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ACTIVITY

Campaign Finance, Dark Money, and Comics Journalism

TOPICS

Contemporary democratic systems, campaign finance, dark money, comics journalism

ACTIVITY TYPES

Reading comprehension, in-class discussion, textual analysis, historical analysis

DURATION

At least two classes

Texts

- Williams, Kristian. 2005. "The Case for Comics Journalism." *Columbia Journalism Review* 43 (6) (March/April): 51–55.
- Versaci, Rocco. 2007. "The 'New Journalism' Revisited." In *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*, 109–38. New York: Continuum.
- Newman, Daniel and George O'Connor. 2020. *Unrig: How to Fix Our Broken Democracy*. New York: World Citizen Comics.

Overview

This activity focuses on the specific genre of comics journalism. The first half of the activity uses two book chapters to explore what comics journalism is and what it offers that traditional reportage cannot. The second half of the activity asks students to explore how these ideas work in relation to a particular text on the syllabus. The activity also asks students to consider the relationship between journalism, comics journalism, civic engagement, and democracy to further explore the democratic potential of comics as a medium.

The activity below explores how Williams's and Versaci's ideas about comics journalism structure and function in *Unrig: How to Fix Our Broken Democracy*, but the questions could easily be adapted to suit any of the comics journalism in the course. If instructors choose to use *Unrig*, they may assign students the entire book or select chapters based on the aims and investments of the particular course.

This activity is imagined as a two-step sequence (conducted over at least two class periods), but instructors may focus on just one set of questions or specific individual questions according to their own syllabus, course goals, and time constraints. Students can use the handout on how to close-read comics (see the How to Close-Read Comics activity) to help guide their analysis in the second step of the activity. These discussion activities can be conducted in line with the principles of democratic dialogue and reflective discussion in either large or small groups (see the Deliberative Dialogue activity and assignment). Instructors may also choose to have students answer questions individually (either in class or for homework). This way, instructors have maximum flexibility in adapting the activity to the needs and goals of their own class.

Goals

Through these discussions students will:

- Practice civic engagement through the principles of democratic dialogue and reflective discussion.
- Improve deep listening, collaboration, and reflection skills through structured conversation.
- Develop their understanding of how the American political system operates in theory and in practice, and how this system has changed over the course of American history.
- Learn about the influence of money in politics, with particular attention to the ways that contemporary campaign finance laws undermine democracy.
- Develop their understanding of comics history and the specificities of comics journalism.
- Practice close-reading skills with a particular emphasis on elements of the comics form, as they analyze the content, structure, and style of various comics texts.
- Improve critical thinking, analytical, and argumentation skills as they articulate interpretations supported by textual evidence.
- Explore ideas that could be further developed in more formal assessment.

Step One: Reading Questions for Williams and Versaci

1. Both Williams and Versaci argue that comics journalism is a way of responding to the limits of traditional reportage. How do they characterize the style and tone of mainstream journalism and what are its problems and limits?
2. Both Williams and Versaci argue that one of the major strengths of comics journalism is its ability to switch between the realistic and the symbolic, the objective and the subjective. Why is this a strength?
3. Both Williams and Versaci argue that another strength of comics journalism comes from its unique ability to combine words and images. Why is this a strength? What does it enable comics journalism to do that prose reportage cannot?
4. Versaci describes both new journalism and comics journalism as “anti-establishment” (111, 114, 125). What does he mean by this and where does this tendency come from?
5. Versaci argues that the outsider status of comics plays an important role in the power of comics journalism. Why is this?

Step Two: Discussion Questions for *Unrig: How to Fix a Broken Democracy*

1. *Unrig* is, in part, an attempt to explain the complex ways that money circulates in and undermines American democracy. How does the graphic novel attempt to simplify these complicated issues and make them easily digestible for the reader? What elements of the comics form are most effective in this regard?
2. As both Versaci and Williams argue, comics journalism challenges the supposed objectivity of mainstream factual reporting by foregrounding the “organizing consciousness” of the reporter. Comics journalism makes no claims to objective truth; rather it makes explicit the processes of selecting, organizing, expressing, and interpreting that are present in all journalism. How do Newman and O’Connor foreground their organizing consciousness? Where/when does this occur in the book? How does the graphic novel maintain a sense of authority and trustworthiness as a form of reportage?
3. Versaci also argues that comics journalism typically embraces an anti-official and anticorporate attitude, telling stories that reject official narratives and offer alternative points of view, often from marginalized perspectives. For Versaci, this is central to the ability of comics journalism to tell a truth that facts alone cannot capture. How do Newman and O’Connor challenge mainstream narratives about democracy and voting and what deeper understanding of the issue do they offer?
4. For Williams, comics journalism acknowledges the humanity of the reporter. In making this perspective explicit, comics journalism encourages the reader to not take what they read at face value but to instead think critically about the information being presented (something that conventional journalism doesn’t necessarily do). Williams also notes that comics journalism still faces issues related to bias, unreliable sources, and ethical dilemmas, but the strategies for addressing these issues are different. How do Newman and O’Connor raise these issues and how do they address them? How do they ask us to critically consider the issues being reported?
5. *Unrig* is also a form of comics activism, as it aims to both inform its reader and prompt social change. How does the text aim to inspire action on the part of the reader? What concrete strategies (if any) does it offer? What logical and emotional appeals does it make? How effective are they?
6. What role does journalism play in a democratic society? How does the idea of comics journalism in particular fulfill (or not) this function? How does comics journalism relate to our earlier conversations about comics and civic engagement and/or comics as a democratic medium? How do the specific features of comics journalism (as a mode that simplifies complex information, embraces anti-establishmentarianism, encourages critical thinking, promotes social action) shape the ways that we understand the ideas of civic engagement and/or democracy?

These questions about *Unrig* are related, and as you discuss them you may well find your conversation jumping between these ideas. As you work through these questions you should consider:

- The use of facts and objective details.
- The narrative structure and organization of the text.
- The page layout and panel design.
- The details within images and their graphiation.
- The information conveyed by words and by images and the relationship between these two modes of communication.
- The way Newman represents himself both visually and through narration.