Graphic Reporting: Human Rights Violations through the Lens of Graphic Novels

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## Introduction

There is a growing interest in the world of graphic novels from a legal viewpoint, but the interconnection between law and graphic novels has not yet been fully assessed in the area of human rights law.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition there is an emergent body of authors who are seeking to use graphic novels to advance what can be broadly understood as human rights awareness-raising, through the depiction or reporting of wide-scale atrocities or rights denial. This raises questions as to the status and potential of a nascent connection between human rights and graphic novels, especially from the perspective of human rights law which is at present largely driven by reports from international organisations not receptive to graphic novels as a means of communication and reporting. From the viewpoint of the graphic novel sphere, there is a question as to whether there is a need to recognise an emergent body of work that could be termed the ‘human rights graphic novel’. Furthermore, the direct engagement by graphic authors with human rights violations leads to potential for greater reciprocity between these graphic reporters and the international system designed to monitor rights protection, and prevent and punish perpetrators.

This chapter explores firstly the concept of graphic reporting, seeking to understand the nature of depicting human rights questions in graphic novel form, as well as identifying texts that fit within the graphic reporting discourse. Secondly, it asks what the added value is, arguing that graphic reporting constitutes a distinct contribution to the reporting of human rights violations that provides particular context and character not achieved by other forms. Thirdly, it identifies the belief that the medium is not sufficiently serious to engage with instances of rights violations or wide scale atrocities, looking at the expression of this viewpoint and the countering arguments. Finally, it seeks to delineate the future of graphic reporting, pointing to the potential for graphic novels to make a marked contribution to the human rights discourse, as well as the broader effects of providing effective detail on situations of human rights violations.

Overall, if this collection is intended for law to meet comics, the present chapter is intended for human rights to meet graphic novels. It asks whether the work of certain pioneering authors can be built upon to understand a space in which the reporting of human rights violations in graphic form can be better understood and recognised, within the international human rights, as well as the graphic novel, spheres.

## What is Graphic Reporting?

The figure of the reporter has featured strongly in graphic novels. A number of prominent characters employ the guise of a reporter to advance the plot or focus the story, as well as explain key elements such as why the central character has the ability and time to travel extensively and conduct investigations. In this regard Tintin is one of the best-recognised character-reporters, while Superman worked for the *Daily Planet*, and Spider-Man was a photographer at the *Daily Bugle*. These fictional representations see reporting primarily as a background occupation, used for the purpose of setting the scenes and the characters and allowing them the necessary freedom to interact across the storylines. In addition, their experiences are entirely fictional and removed from any association with human rights violations, real or imagined, and are absent any requisite call for change or action inherent in reporting on actual abuses.

A more recent generation of graphic novelists has cast aside the fictional representation of reporting, to place such investigations to the fore. These have started to undertake reporting, notably on war situations but also on wider human rights violations, by using graphic novels as a main source of reporting. They take a point-of-view approach to eschew the characterisation of the reporter and place the experience of the novelist as central, documenting the experiences of war or other atrocities in a representation of human rights violations as lived in graphic form. Joe Sacco’s works are immediately identifiable but he is not an isolated example, arguably being representative of a new generation of graphic authors (the word ‘novelists’ may not be correct given its association with fiction, but is the prevailing descriptor) who are using graphic novels to report on real situations and chart serious human rights abuses. In this context these authors do not invent or create a character that will do the reporting, but are themselves reporting on a real situation, often placing themselves within the narrative as the reporter in question.

Sacco has drafted a manifesto to capture what these graphic authors are doing, arguing it is not correct to divorce journalism and graphic novels, and implicitly demanding that graphic accounts be taken seriously as a source. The title of his work, which draws together a number of different scenarios of factual atrocities, experiences, injustice and violations, and compiles them in one volume, is *Journalism*—a deliberate choice of nomenclature. In a succinct overview of where he sees his work, he compares the graphic author with the journalist, and draws out the similarities and differences:

The journalist’s standard obligations—to report accurately, to get quotes right, and to check claims—still pertain. A writer can breezily describe a convoy of UN vehicles as ‘a convoy of UN vehicles’ and move on to the rest of the story. A comics journalist must draw a convoy of vehicles, and that raises a lot of questions. So, what do these vehicles look like? What do the uniforms of the UN personnel look like? What does the road look like? And what about the surrounding hills?[[2]](#footnote-2)

The use of the phrase ‘comics journalist’ is not attributed, and it is not certain if Sacco in fact coined this phrase; he is in any case widely attributed as a pioneer of comics journalism, as recognised in the handful of commentaries on this emerging field.[[3]](#footnote-3) Sacco’s works *Palestine*,[[4]](#footnote-4) and *Safe Area Gorazde*,[[5]](#footnote-5) are seen as seminal texts in comics journalism, with *The Comics Journal* calling him ‘virtually a one-man comics genre: the cartoonist-journalist’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Indeed, Sacco was formally trained in journalism.[[7]](#footnote-7) The number of graphic novels that are reporting on real situations is growing; some journalists have even used the term ‘conflict-based, nonfiction comic reporting’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet Sacco himself has noted that his more recent work is stepping back from conflict to cover broader situations of human rights violations, evident in his depiction of the Dalits of India and their experience of trenchant caste discrimination.[[9]](#footnote-9) In this regard, perhaps Sacco is not really a journalist in that the focus of his work is not necessarily topical or current, and may lack a ‘hook’; but rather a human rights reporter in graphic form.

In 2000, Emmanuel Guibert published *The Photographer*, which was labelled by the New York Times as ‘part photojournalism and part graphic memoir’.[[10]](#footnote-10)*The Photographer* was received as a novel way of describing in detail the impact of war on the daily lives of the civilian population, and as such provided a new platform to undertake reporting: not quite a documentary, nor a film, nor a novel, but a detailed graphic depiction of the situation. Guibert’s work is an illustration of this new generation of authors using the graphic novel form to provide a detailed and differing account on human rights abuses. A further example is the work of Guy Delisle in a series of graphic novels about his travels with strong human rights themes.[[11]](#footnote-11) All these graphic novels contain a high level of reporting on the human rights situation in the countries covered in the books. The number of graphic novels that are reporting on real life situations, but more particularly on real life human rights abuses, is growing, as clearly graphic novels are becoming a distinct medium to report on atrocities and abuses.

These authors are following the same rules of reporting as foreign correspondents sent to conflict situations by media outlets, or documentary film-makers intent on providing greater background and commentary on situations of violence and conflict. The aims are manifold but share a desire to raise awareness on situations of human rights violations. The new approach is the medium, which instead of writing or documentary film, is using graphic representation of the atrocities. These authors are not labelled as journalists, or human rights reporters, but share many of their functions, and have adopted a similar ethos. In his introduction to *Safe Area Gorazde*, Christopher Hitchens distinguishes Sacco from ‘the hacks’, the journalists gathered in the disfigured Holiday Inn in Sarajevo, describing instead ‘the oblique figure at the edge of the scene’ with the eye and the ear to record and outlive the carnage, and perhaps contribute to rebuilding the community.[[12]](#footnote-12) The distinction is effusively made. Similarly, the journalistic approach is extended in the sense that broader situations of human rights violations not necessarily linked to conflict are entering the consciousness of graphic authors.

Traditionally, graphic or comics authors used to have a small space, and in the best cases a few pages in newspapers or magazines, to illustrate the ‘serious’ report undertaken by the journalist. The illustration was there only as an aid or accompaniment to the main text. This has changed, notably with the emergence of ‘proper’ news outlets that are providing a space for graphic reporting to be expressed, not as an added illustration but as the main vehicle to carry the information. For example, in France the news magazine *La Revue 21* was created with the particular aim of using graphic novels as a medium of reporting.[[13]](#footnote-13) The result is a periodical graphic account of human rights abuses taking place across the globe, presumably the first such publication. This has led to the recent publication of ‘*Grand Reporters: 20 Histoires Vraies’*, a collective work that includes authors such as Sacco, Guibert, Ferrandez, Tronchet and Stassens, under the rubric of reporting on ‘real life stories’ with a backdrop of political or military events or everyday hardship, and its perpetrators and victims.[[14]](#footnote-14) Although more prominent in the Francophone world, where graphic novels are considered the ‘ninth art’ form, there is evidence of a small take-up of this approach in the Anglophone world as well.[[15]](#footnote-15)

As well as reporting directly on human rights issues, graphic novels may also raise or generate human rights issues. For example, the theme of racial discrimination offers a vein of inquiry. *Tintin in the Congo* was recently the subject of failed legal proceedings in a Belgian court, with consequent commentary emerging around the limits of hate speech legislation.[[16]](#footnote-16) Michael Farr writes in his notes on the Tintin series, ‘if *Tintin in the Congo* gives a wildly inaccurate picture of Africa, it does at least illustrate the prejudice with which Europeans then viewed Africans’.[[17]](#footnote-17) A similar controversy on racism emerged over the Mexican character, Memin Pinguin, the subject of discussion in a legal journal.[[18]](#footnote-18) The issue is also explored in the anthropomorphic detective series *Blacksad*, which portrays vicious inter-racial violence and segregation in the graphic novel *Arctic Nation*, pitting white-furred animal characters against black-furred animal characters and opening with a lynching.[[19]](#footnote-19) These texts belong in the literary rather than the journalistic genre, and may be analysed inter alia from the established law and literature perspective and other interdisciplinary standpoints.[[20]](#footnote-20) But they ought to be distinguished from the practice of graphic reporting.

Graphic reporting is clearly distinct from graphic novels even though the latter may raise questions of interest for human rights. Graphic reporting involves the overt and intentional depiction of human rights violations or conflict situations in graphic novel format. For example in India, the Dalits, at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, are developing graphic novels that examine questions of caste prejudice and atrocities. Thus *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*[[21]](#footnote-21) is written and drawn in Gond art, and begins with a discussion around reservations, a legal affirmative action policy that was established in the Constitution of India in 1950 to address historic discrimination and uplift those at the bottom of the caste system. The legal elements are precise and draw on the historical struggle for equal treatment on the basis of caste through the personality of Ambedkar, a Dalit leader in the early twentieth century who drafted the Indian Constitution and infused it with legal protections against caste discrimination. This graphic novel is particularly concerned with the implementation of legal remedies, and the gaps between legal protection and everyday discrimination, violence and atrocities experienced by Dalits. A further publication, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*,[[22]](#footnote-22) indicates a particular interest in Dalit graphic novels on the part of this publishing house. Similarly, as noted above, Sacco has explored the treatment of Dalits, portraying the subtleties and social mechanisms in an Indian village that keep Dalits subordinated despite constitutional bans on untouchability and other discriminatory practices.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Graphic reporting is not the identification of human rights questions in literary works of graphic fiction, but rather purports to capture the reality of human rights violations as experienced. Thus Prajna Desai, in a commentary on *Bhimayana*, notes that beyond its graphic quality and pedigree, the book is ‘unusually germane for being grounded in present-day journalism’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

## What is the ‘Added Value’?

A specificity of this type of reporting is its graphic nature, which renders the report on human rights violations particularly vivid. The combination of text and illustration is known to offer a strong combination to mark the reader’s mind. As highlighted by Jennifer George-Palilonis in her book on graphics reporting:

the combination of words and visual within a story package have an extreme impact on catching a reader’s attention, keeping it and even ensuring that he or she retains the information much longer than when a story is provided in the form of words alone. Information graphics generally stimulate more brainpower because they appeal to both the literal and visual regions of the brain. Information graphics can tell stories with a degree of detail that is often otherwise impossible.[[25]](#footnote-25)

But the process is deeper than a straightforward combination of words and images. One commentator terms this the ‘biocularity’ of the graphic narrative, a complexity realised in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* whereby: ‘the author-artist’s memory of a childhood in Iran, the creation of the child character-avatar, and the narrator-avatar’s commentary collaborate to tell a complex verbal-pictorial story infused with memories and its emotions without detracting from the memoir’s realism’.[[26]](#footnote-26) This ‘narrative agility’[[27]](#footnote-27) can have a major impact when it comes to reporting real life human rights violations. Not only does it provide more nuances, but these can stay in the reader’s mind with more impact than traditional reporting. As captured in a review of Sacco’s work, a reporter writes, ‘The images Sacco draws are so powerful that they burn deep into your retina and reconfigure how you see the world’.[[28]](#footnote-28) This statement highlights how graphic reporting can provide a very human and powerful description of some of the worst human rights violations. Evidently, graphic novels can report on human rights violations with a force that often eludes other media.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Graphic reporting allows the reporter to integrate much more artistic and detailed elements when reporting on the suffering of trauma or violence. To give an illustration, much has been written on the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994. This has included newspaper reports, articles, films, documentaries and novels.[[30]](#footnote-30) All this reporting vividly testifies to the extreme violence suffered by victims and survivors, and provides analyses on the relationship between the different communities involved. Recently, Jean-Philippe Stassens, a Belgian graphic author, has examined the Rwandan genocide from the angle of the graphic novel in his book *Déogratias*.[[31]](#footnote-31) The work is based on months of investigative journalism in the country and region. In this graphic account of the genocide, one of the main characters transforms himself into a dog when violence erupts around him. This reporting on how violence can take hold of an individual provides the reader with a rich and traumatically graphic vision of extreme violence, as well as its triggers. Moreover, an important aspect of the use of graphic reporting relates to the way the author employs the narrative to allow the reader to move across timelines. Mass killings, and especially genocide, involve deep-rooted and embedded discrimination, which has brewed over time to unleash into a form of extreme violence. By its nature, graphic reporting allows the use of inter-temporal illustration to show how these historical and integrated forms of discrimination relate to the mass killing and its aftermath.

<FIGURE 14.1 HERE>

In *Déogratias* this approach allows the author to address the issue of ethnic divisions and the way these have been consumed by the characters both in the past (before the genocide), during the genocide, and in its aftermath, all within the same movement of the pen (see Figure 14.1). The text displays powerful juxtaposition of these three different timeframes, often within a same page, which allows the author to highlight how they need to be viewed together to capture the reality faced by individuals. A written account, or other forms of reporting including visual documentaries, could not include this trans-temporal element in a simultaneous manner. In the context of Rwanda it matters especially, as historical accounts and present day narratives on ethnicity play an immense role, often translated in written accounts as a dichotomy between the ‘good Tutsi’ (the victims) and the ‘bad Hutus’ (the perpetrators), a narrative that fails to integrate the complexity of the relationship and divisions in its historical span. *Déogratias* avoids this dichotomy by offering a trans-temporal account through the eyes of a character who is neither good nor bad, and whose ethnicity does not define the good or the bad. As summarised by Glover:

The multimodality of the graphic novel exists in its combination of the literary and the visual, which enables the genre to visually represent multiple temporalities in sequences of drawn frames. The treatment of memory and trauma in these graphic novels is emboldened by the form’s ability to visually layer, sequence, and juxtapose multiple temporalities.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Arguably, this multilayering of sequences and temporalities provides a vivid and rich account when it comes to the complexity of human rights violations, something not easily transcribed in official reports or other forms of written account of these atrocities. From this perspective, graphic reporting provides a valuable medium for reporting on atrocities or violations that need to be put into their temporal context.

A further element is the daily-life scenery that requires comprehension. Thus another ‘added value’ of graphic reporting relates to the fact that graphic novels allow a much deeper and profound analysis of the hinterland than that afforded by textual reporting. The graphic novel provides a medium to allow the reporter to push the reader to integrate details in the background that are often not easy to transcribe in a text-only report. The attention placed on the details in graphic reporting provides useful and rich information to the reader that will allow a better comprehension of the overall situation. Hitchens, present as a journalist in Bosnia, noted this in his introduction to *Safe Area Gorazde*:

Sacco’s combined word-illustration makes me remember that distinctive Bosnian domestic architecture—the gable ends and windows—with a few deft strokes. You know where you are, in other words, and not in some generic hotspot. Then the additional details, such as the unforgettable ‘bear’s paw’ scar that a mortar-shell makes on a pavement. And—more easily replicated but still impressive—the forlorn look of a wood-built house that’s been reduced by fire to a silhouette and a brick chimney stack.[[33]](#footnote-33)

There is evidently a wider potential appeal, with *Déogratias* and *Safe Area Gorazde* far more accessible to a broad audience than the decisions of the international criminal tribunals on Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia for example. This is not to indicate that these graphic works represent a popularisation of particular issues; it is just to emphasise that they act as a vehicle to bring serious human rights questions to the fore, in a manner that is idiosyncratic and innovative, and, although limited to their own means of expression, provides greater depth of analysis than text alone. They do not replace academic works of history or law; they provide colour and expression to the experience of human rights violations.

## Is it ‘Serious’?

Comics and graphic novels are often seen as less serious than ‘proper’ media such as journalism. In the words of Doherty, comics are ‘associated with the madcap, the childish, the trivial’.[[34]](#footnote-34) This vision of comics and therefore graphic novels as childish means that for many people reporting serious human rights violations through the medium of the graphic novel is seen not only as inappropriate but as an insult to the ‘seriousness’ of the situation.[[35]](#footnote-35) The extent to which it is recognised within media is difficult to ascertain, although Sacco claims, ‘Comic journalism has also become respectable among many reporters … in that many co-journalists don’t find it unusual or less worthy to pursue journalism in a comics form’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Nevertheless, he also notes that a ‘great disadvantage’ relates to ‘the sense of respectability from outside sources’, whereby ‘many people look at sequential mediums as an inferior medium’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Hence in *Journalism* we see a defence of the comics journalist, including the necessary subjectivity inherent in all journalism: ‘Ultimately, a drawing reflects the vision of the individual cartoonist. I do not think this exiles a drawn report from the realm of journalism’.[[38]](#footnote-38)

As indicated, Sacco is perhaps the central figure in comics journalism and graphic reporting, providing the strongest arguments for its broader recognition, and it is appropriate to isolate his particular experience in explaining his medium to an individual firmly embedded in the architecture of international law and justice. In *Journalism*, he describes a meeting with Louise Arbour, then prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and Gabrielle McDonald then president of the ICTY. Sacco seeks to portray them in his depiction of the Tribunal through interviews on the work of the institution as well as its aims. They responded with heavy scepticism, viewing comics as not being of sufficient seriousness to depict the workings of the ICTY. In this regard, they did not wish to support a medium that they believed might undermine the workings of international justice. Sacco expresses his exasperation, noting that the ending of his graphic snapshot of the Tribunal was somewhat spoiled by the absence of the viewpoints of the major actors within the Tribunal, which he had planned to include as his closing depictions. As a result, he notes, his final narrative appears somewhat truncated.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In an analysis of the external perceptions of the sister International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Kingsley Chiedu Moghalu, Legal Adviser to the ICTR, demonstrates how the visibility of the Tribunal is relatively low, and outlines why the image and perception of the Tribunal both as a court and as an organisation is important.[[40]](#footnote-40) He highlights the nature of international criminal justice as fundamentally different from that of national justice, involving crimes that strike at the heart of our common humanity such as genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, orchestrated by powerful political, military and other figures. Hence the impact of the tribunals goes beyond the forensic combat of the courtroom, and the perception of whether their trials and related activities can or will bring about results is just as important as what happens in their courtrooms.[[41]](#footnote-41) He asks:

But does the tribunal receive adequate coverage? The answer, nonetheless, is ‘no’. Many stories on the tribunal, because they are filed by wire agencies, are ‘spot news’ reports that lack depth, content, and context that would truly enlighten readers. Thus, while the ICTR may be widely reported, it is not reported in an in-depth manner except on an occasional basis.[[42]](#footnote-42)

It would appear that graphic depiction of the workings of international criminal justice ought to be encouraged and supported, given its unique ability to provide ‘depth, content and context’. Yet Sacco’s meeting with Arbour captures the difficulties inherent in arguing for the importance of graphic reporting. There is a prima facie belief that graphic novels are not serious, in the sense that newspapers or other reporting mechanisms are. Furthermore, even if their seriousness is accepted, there is a lack of authority perceived in graphic novels, which cannot act in the same way as a report from an NGO or other monitoring group, and certainly cannot be considered ‘objective’. In this sense, graphic novels are not afforded any human rights character or weight, and are considered merely as fiction. Sacco and others have to combat this perception and are doing so through continued reporting from situations they consider require it.

This viewpoint that graphic reporting is not sufficiently serious is anachronistic. There is no evidence that graphic reporters are trying to undermine the institutions or incidents they wish to portray, any more than any other critical work may seek to do. Sacco’s description of the demeanour of the judges in the ICTY in his short account is intriguing, as is his movement between the defendants and the events they are accused of, with very real attempts to ascribe their human attributes (see Figure 14.2). In this regard the work of graphic reporting humanises its subjects, removing atrocities from the realm of the abstract. It shows the existing accused—whether in a dock of an international tribunal or in situ while committing an act—as well as the existing victim—including their facial expressions, the scenes of the room or countryside or cityscape—and the reactions of those who are witnessing, or failing to intervene in, or passively observing,[[43]](#footnote-43) or being affected by, the atrocity. This emotional impact forms part of a wider interest in how human rights atrocities are committed and why, and explores the conditions that foster an environment where widespread rights violations can occur.[[44]](#footnote-44) It is a very serious enterprise.

<FIGURE 14.2 HERE>

It is unfortunate that the former prosecutor and president of the ICTY failed to recognise this. Increasingly, the international tribunals have become divorced from their wider context, and there are far too few insights into how they are working and their efficacy or otherwise in delivering international justice, as well as preventing further atrocities.[[45]](#footnote-45) As Moghalu notes in relation to the ICTR:

the Rwandan genocide, portrayed as ‘tribal chaos and anarchy’ in order to locate it within the prevailing stereotype of the African continent as one in perpetual crisis, was given wide global media coverage. The search for justice for the genocide by an international court sitting in Africa has not, however, attracted a fraction of that coverage.[[46]](#footnote-46)

He concludes that ‘the tribunal should pursue a much more proactive strategy to building external perceptions of its work’,[[47]](#footnote-47) which evidently prioritises targeting global television media outlets but also includes a media program bringing selected journalists to cover the tribunal. Such strategies should include graphic novelists. Commentators have noted the general ability of ‘literature [to] do justice to the trauma in a way the law does not’,[[48]](#footnote-48) and graphic reporting can depict both the disconnected trauma of experience in the fictional figure of *Déogratias* and the faithful reportage of the international legal trials that follow, as attempted by Sacco. Thus graphic reporting may be particularly suited to the depiction of international crimes and their adjudication. Schabas observes that ‘international criminal justice is different from “ordinary” prosecution at the domestic level’,[[49]](#footnote-49) due to the nature of the crimes pursued—genocide or crimes against humanity for example, rather than ‘ordinary’ crimes such as murder—the involvement of the State, and, crucially, the fact that those prosecuted are representative of the crimes committed. The goal of international criminal law is not to prosecute all perpetrators, but rather to prosecute only those most responsible. It has a symbolic as well as a narrow legal function. Hence the representation and dissemination of international criminal justice is integral to its workings.

Irrespective of whether graphic reporting is accepted as legitimate or not by international actors, it is at the very least adding to the documentation of human rights atrocities and violations, and seeking deeper understandings of its causes and experiences, as well as moving into the realm of legal redress. It is perhaps inevitable that graphic novelists who have depicted the atrocities in Yugoslavia and Rwanda would seek out the international courtrooms which are holding those most responsible to account. The continuance and growth of graphic reporting points to a role that has not as yet been recognised, but is contributing to the array of human rights reportage and providing its own particular insights and testimonies.

## The Future of Human Rights Reporting

Having examined some of the specificities of graphic reporting, it remains to be asked whether there is space for graphic human rights reporting under the current human rights agenda. It is apparent that this sub-genre of graphic novels perceives itself as analogous to journalism, but has not as yet considered fully its position within the human rights discourse. Human rights reporting is a central pillar of the UN supervisory competence in terms of compliance with international human rights law and has been mainstreamed within its operations. The extent to which graphic reporting can contribute to this has not been explored, but there is evidently much potential. Human rights reporting is at present varied, and human rights organisations use a range of tactics, as well as reflecting in themselves much diversity of constitution and outlook. It is apparent that integrating graphic reporting is very possible and can evolve beyond its present status.

There is evidence that some NGOs have started to use the medium of the graphic novel to support their campaigns and raise awareness. For example *Survival International*, a charity working to support the human rights of indigenous peoples globally, has produced a comic or graphic narrative called *There you Go!* This ‘cartoon book’ takes a satirical swipe at the ‘development’ of tribal peoples. Drawn by Oren Ginzburg, it tells the story of how tribal peoples are being destroyed in the name of ‘development’.[[50]](#footnote-50)

This represents a relatively rare attempt at using graphic material for campaigning and human rights awareness-raising, but it is possible that the so-called ‘gatekeeper’ human rights NGOs (*Amnesty International* and *Human Rights Watch*) could produce graphic accounts of human rights situations. They could employ graphic reporters to provide illustrations of the everyday reality of human rights violations in particular situations, and publish these as NGO reports. This would add character and situation to their aim of disseminating information on human rights violations. The suggestion is not to replace their existing legalistic approach, in which their reports combine accounts of rights violations by reference to international legal standards; rather, it would complement or supplement existing reportage. For example, *Human Rights Watch* have issued a series of reports and communications on the situation of migrant workers in Gulf States such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar;[[51]](#footnote-51) a graphic report on the horrific conditions and grind in labour camps in which many such migrant workers live would add to their impact. Evidently smaller NGOs could also contemplate such innovative practices.

The UN is consistently seeking broader impact in terms of disseminating its message on situations of human rights, as well as providing legal remedies for violations. Graphic reporting is potentially a major tool in bringing the wider message of rights situations to an international audience. Although it may not be countenanced at present due to prevailing and outdated perceptions of the lack of gravity of graphic novels,[[52]](#footnote-52) the UN mechanisms could integrate graphic reporting. The UN Special Rapporteurs, who hold mandates from the Human Rights Council to investigate particular situations or countries,[[53]](#footnote-53) could invite graphic reporters to supplement their reports with depictions of the situations being described; this could begin with such established figures as Sacco. Indeed the present authors believe Sacco would in fact make an excellent Special Rapporteur in his own right—one who could report to the UN Human Rights Council in graphic form on a variety of themes. Until such potential developments, the continued belief that graphic novels are not serious will hinder an effective form of dissemination and awareness on human rights issues.

The realm of graphic novels needs to take greater recognition of its potential in a human rights context. There are not many graphic reporters, with the majority of comics authors focusing on fiction. This can be contrasted with film, where documentary is probably the fastest growing genre in the industry and has gained in recent years major recognition beyond its previously niche status. Within documentary, we now see a variety of human rights film festivals, and many filmmakers are seeking to document lives and experiences in the context of rights violations rather than the more traditional story-telling aims.[[54]](#footnote-54) By contrast, graphic novel festivals are dominated by superhero and other genres, and there is no representation for human rights in Comic-Con or in the Francophone equivalent at Angoulême.[[55]](#footnote-55) These festivals of graphic writing need to find space for the small but important group of authors that are advancing human rights protection through innovative and effective reporting in graphic form. At the very least, a human rights or graphic reporting stall at these festivals would appear to be appropriate.

Graphic reporting is a means by which graphic novels can chart human rights violations and the mechanisms for their prevention. It deserves greater recognition from the graphic novels sphere as well as the human rights sphere. A number of interesting and important works have already emerged, signalling the development of a genre that does not overlap with existing reportage, but rather has its own distinct identity and function. The mechanisms for human rights protection are constantly evolving, and subsuming graphic reporting will bring important and heightened exposure to the reality of human rights abuses around the world.

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1. The term ‘human rights’ has many connotations but the term ‘human rights law’ is more readily delineated. It refers to the collection of international treaties and standards overseen by the United Nations, drawing its authority from the 1945 Charter of the United Nations, and articulated first as a global standard in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The contemporary contours of ‘human rights law’ are expressed in the mandate of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, available at <www.ohchr.org> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Preface to J Sacco, *Journalism* (Metropolitan Books 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for example Nalvic, ‘A Quick Guide to Comics Journalism’ (*Nalvic’s Reviews*, 12 June 2012) <http://nalvicreviews.wordpress.com/2012/06/12/a-quick-guide-to-comic-journalism/> accessed 15 April 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J Sacco, *Palestine* (Jonathon Cape 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. J Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde* (Jonathon Cape 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. G Groth, ‘Joe Sacco on *Footnotes in Gaza*’ (2011) 301 *The Comics Journal* <http://www.tcj.com/tcj-301-joe-sacco-on-footnotes-in-gaza/> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. D Crumm, ‘Sacco Nails down Comic Credentials in Journalism’ (*Read the Spirit*) <http://www.readthespirit.com/explore/joe-sacco-nails-down-comic-credentials-in-journalism/> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A Holpuch, ‘Joseph Kony Graphic Novel Illustrates Personal Stories of Violent Campaign’ (*The Guardian*, 15 March 2013) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/15/joseph-kony-graphic-novel-violent> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. J Sacco, ‘Kushinagar: A Comics Journalist Chronicles the Struggles of UP Dalits’ (*The Caravan*, 1 January 2012) <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/reporting-and-essays/kushinagar> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. C Hedges, ‘What War Looks Like’ (*New York Times*, 24 May 2009) <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/books/review/Hedges-t.html?\_r=2&> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. G Delisle, *Shenzhen* (Drawn and Quarterly 2000); G Delisle, *Pyongyang* (Drawn and Quarterly 2003); G Delisle, *Burma Chronicles* (Drawn and Quarterly 2007); and G Delisle, *Jerusalem* (Drawn and Quarterly 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. C Hitchens, introduction to Sacco (n 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *La Revue 21* <http://www.revue21.fr> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. O Balez and others, *Grand Reporters: 20 Histoires Varies* (Les Arènes XXI 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See for example the *Cartoon Picayune* <http://www.cartoonpicayune.com>, which has similar aims; the *Illustrated Press* <http://illuspress.com>; and *Comics Journalism* <http://www.comicsjournalism.com> (all accessed 15 April 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See J Vrielink, ‘Judging the Past: Discrimination Law, Hate Speech Legislation and the Colonial Imagination’ (2012) 12 *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. M Farr, *Tintin: The Complete Companion* (Egmont Press 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See TL Banks, ‘Mestizaje and the Mexican Mestizo Self: No Hay Sangrenegra, so there is no Blackness’ (2006) 15 *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 199, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. JD Canales and J Guarnido, *Blacksad: Arctic Nation* (Dargaud 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See for example R Posner, *Law and Literature* (Harvard University Press 1998). The law and literature genre is well-established, although it has not has not engaged to any notable extent with graphic novels. See also Chapter 13 of the current volume, which reflects on the problems of global justice though two superhero works from DC comics. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. D Vyam, S Vyam, S Natarajan and S Anand, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (Navayana 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. S Natarajan and A Ninan, *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule’s Fight for Liberty* (Navayana 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See ‘Kushinagar’ in Sacco (n 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. P Desai, ‘Review of Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability’ (*The Comics Journal*, 18 April 2012) <http://www.tcj.com/reviews/bhimayana-experiences-of-untouchability/> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. J George-Palilonis, *A Practical Guide to Graphics Reporting: Information Graphics for Print, Web and Broadcast* (Elsevier 2006) 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. PJ Rader, ‘Iconoclastic Readings and Self-reflexive Rebellions in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*’ in J Jakaitis and JF Wurtz (eds), *Crossing Boundaries in Graphic Narrative* (McFarland 2012) 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *National Post* (Toronto), as quoted in Sacco (n 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. On this issue, see also R Versace, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (Continuum 2007), which includes a chapter on war memoir and the unique ability of comics to capture its human/real-life details. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See for example P Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (Picador 1999); J Hatzfeld, *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak* (Other Press 2007); T George, K Pearson, D Cheadle and P Rusesabagina (eds), *Hotel Rwanda: Bringing the True Story of an African Hero to Film* (Newmarket Press 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. J Stassens, *Déogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (Dupuis 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. J Glover, *Narrating Crisis: Rwanda, Haiti and the Politics of Commemoration* (Doctoral Thesis, University of Florida 2011) 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. C Hitchens, introduction to Sacco (n 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. T Doherty, ‘Art Spiegelman‘s Maus: Graphic Art and the Holocaust’ (1996) 68 *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See for example Versaci (n 29) 8-9: Versaci discusses inter alia the reception of the comic book adaptation of the 9/11 commission report, in which the graphic account was seen as reductive and inappropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Sacco, as quoted in Nalvic (n 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Sacco (n 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. KC Moghalu, ‘Image and Reality of War Crimes Justice: External Perceptions of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda’ (2002) 26 *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 21. The analysis outlines how coverage of the ICTY is by comparison much more widespread and sympathetic. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid 24. He notes that this under-reporting is despite the fact that the ICTR is the first international criminal tribunal to convict a head of government for genocide and to convict an individual for rape as a crime against humanity. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. The ‘bystander’ has been the subject of analysis in international criminal law—see for example LE Fletcher, ‘From Indifference to Engagement: Bystanders and International Criminal Justice’ (2005) 26 *Michigan Journal of International Law* 1013. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. For example the creation of these conditions were elaborated in the so-called ‘media trial’ *Nahimana et al* of the ICTR, where Ferdinand Nahimana and others were convicted for incitement to genocide through the broadcasts of their radio station and newspaper publications. See further GS Gordon, ‘A War of Media, Words, Newspapers and Television Stations: The ICTR Media Trial Verdict and a New Chapter in the International Law of Hate Speech’ (2004) 45 *Virginia Journal of International Law* 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Thus Fletcher (n 43) 1018 notes: ‘tribunals should act outside the courtroom—through outreach programs and in conjunction with other institutions—to engage bystanders directly as a target audience. International tribunals currently are under-connected to other initiatives to promote social reconstruction.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Moghalu (n 40) 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. S Feldman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press 2002) 8. The depiction of trauma in graphic novels is further discussed in L Dragulescu, ‘Drawing the Trauma of Race: Choices and Crises of Representation in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*’ in J Jakaitis and JF Wurtz (eds), *Crossing Boundaries in Graphic Narrative* (McFarland 2012) 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. WA Schabas, *Unimaginable Atrocities: Justice, Politics and Rights at the War Crimes Tribunals* (Oxford University Press 2012) 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. O Ginzburg, *There you Go!* (Survival International 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. See for example: Human Rights Watch, ‘Building Towers, Cheating Workers: Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in the United Arab Emirates’ (Human Rights Watch Report, 12 November 2006) <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uae1106webwcover.pdf> accessed 15 April 2014; Human Rights Watch, ‘Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar Ahead of FIFA 2022’ (Human Rights Watch Report, 6 December 2012) <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/qatar0612webwcover\_0.pdf> accessed 15 April 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. On why comics or graphic novels are yet to achieve legitimacy as a unique form of expression, see further A Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: History of the Comics Code* (University Press of Mississippi 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. A full list of the range of Special Rapporteurs is available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Welcomepage.aspx> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. For example, Human Rights Watch run their own ‘Human Rights Watch Film Festival’; see further <https://ff.hrw.org/about> accessed 15 April 14. See also the One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival <http://www.oneworld.cz/2014/> accessed 15 April 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Although some smaller alternative festivals, such as Toronto Comic Arts Festival, do afford particular space to graphic reporting. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)