



# Comics Periodicals as an Educational and Entertainment Source in the Beginning of the 20th Century: An Interview with Eva Van de Wiele

*Las revistas de cómic como fuente de educación y entretenimiento a comienzos del siglo XX: Una entrevista a Eva Van de Wiele*

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## Abstract

A historical perspective is key to understand the roles of comics in nowadays leisure and educational culture. This interview with the researcher Eva Van de Wiele (Ghent University) focuses on *Chapter 3: Edutainment* from the doctoral thesis *Building a Glocalised Serial for Children: Corriere dei Piccoli (1908-1923) and TBO (1917-1932)*. The dialogue focuses on the magazines *Corriere dei Piccoli* y *TBO*, both aimed to educate and entertain the child reader in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. The interview explores the motivation behind this research project, the tools and procedures which were carried out, the characterisation and impact of these children periodicals, and their affinity with contemporary children's comic magazines. Eva Van de Wiele is currently researching the postdoctoral project "Reading Mickey", on the appropriation and reception of the French and the Italian journal *Mickey* from the 1930s until the 1960s.

**Keywords:** Periodical; Comic; TBO; Corriere dei Piccoli; Education

## Resumen

La mirada histórica es fundamental para entender las funciones que realiza el cómic en el ocio y la cultura escolar actual. Esta entrevista a la investigadora postdoctoral Eva Van de Wiele (Universidad de Gante) se centra en el *Capítulo 3: Edutainment* de su tesis doctoral *Building a Glocalised Serial for Children: Corriere dei Piccoli (1908-1923) and TBO (1917-1932)*. El diálogo se centra en las revistas *Corriere dei Piccoli* y *TBO*, ambas dirigidas a educar y entretener al lector infantil en las décadas de 1910, 1920 y 1930. La entrevista explora la motivación detrás de este proyecto de investigación, las herramientas y procedimientos seguidos, la caracterización e impacto de estas revistas infantiles, y su afinidad con revistas infantiles de cómic contemporáneas. Eva Van de Wiele actualmente investiga el proyecto postdoctoral "Reading Mickey", sobre la apropiación y la recepción de la revista *Mickey* en Italia y Francia entre los años 30 y 60.

**Palabras clave:** Revista; Cómic; TBO; Corriere dei Piccoli; Educación



The dissertation by Eva Van de Wiele, titled *Building a Glocalised Serial for Children: Corriere dei Piccoli (1908-1923) and TBO (1917-1932)*, offers a transnational perspective on the periodicals aimed at children with the longest trajectory in Spain, *TBO*, and Italy, *Corriere dei Piccoli*. Taking as the reference the understudied period 1908-1932, the thesis examines the ways in which these magazines appropriate transnational comics materials to build their stories, educate, entertain and loyalise the child reader. In *Chapter 3: Edutainment* the researcher focuses on how the magazines educate and entertain the readers through multimodal elements and other tasks that invite playfulness and active reading (for instance, DIY<sup>1</sup> tasks or word games). The chapter compares *TBO* and *Corriere dei Piccoli*, offering a perspective on their similarities as well as differences on their perceptions of childhood and education.

I met Eva Van de Wiele during my research stay with the COMICS Project research group at Ghent University, in which she is a collaborator. At that moment, Eva was working on her postdoctoral research proposal, “Reading Mickey”, which focused on the domestication of the French and Italian *Mickey* from 1932 to 1968, and on which she is currently working (to know more about Eva’s postdoctoral research project see Eva Van de Wiele, n.d.). Through this research stay, we had the chance to share our experience as comic researchers and readers, and I had the opportunity to learn about the Italian and Spanish periodicals that Eva had thoroughly studied throughout her thesis.

**Interviewer:** You have mentioned in the thesis-book that your study is framed in a research field that is very specific to the United States, Japan and the Franco-Belgian contexts, and that this is why you were interested in studying different contexts, which are Spain and Italy. Besides this, what made you interested in researching *TBO* and *Corriere dei Piccoli* in the context of Spain and Italy and during this specific time?

**Eva:** I chose *TBO* and *Corriere dei Piccoli* because both became a comic magazine par excellence in their respective countries.

*TBO* is (or at least was) a cultural reference for Spain. Evidence of this is that for a long time *TBO* was the word used to refer to a comic that was funny and for children, the combination of the two. The magazine played a pivotal role in coining the term for a previously unnamed concept, as it introduced a novel idea that had no label. I choose the two because both almost survived the entire 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Do It Yourself (DIY) is a way of building or creating things by oneself.

Century. *TBO* started in 1917 and *Corriere dei Piccoli* in 1908 and they both survived, although there were breaks in between because of political and socio-historical events, until the 1990s. They give us a good idea of a product that was popular, widespread, read by a lot of children and exchanged between a lot of children all through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Then, the question is: Why do I only focus on the first 15 years? Because I was mainly interested in circulation before that major year, 1932, when there was an avalanche of American material entering in European comics. We all know that *Mickey Mouse* and *Tarzan* stories came on the market, and then American on-going adventure comics really changed children's press in Europe. But clearly, there was something happening before that moment. The idea was to complexify that story and I found interesting things in those first fifteen years.

My main interest was not on political propaganda, because a lot of scholars have investigated that, while nobody had really focused on the transnational circulation of material, be it on *TBO* of French comic artists and French inspiration, and in *Corriere dei Piccoli* in the form of a lot of American comics. That was the gap in research that I found and that was also a way to compare them both, because they both reflect the history of a popular media format but interestingly differ as to international inspiration.

**Interviewer:** It sounds highly interesting. Focusing now on the educational and entertaining part, in your thesis-book you explain that different people characterised these periodicals as “spaces of education, entertainment, refuge, or apprentice”. From your own perspective after researching it, how would you describe the periodicals?

**Eva:** I was interested in how these magazines tried to educate the children, and how they incorporate the legacy of children's periodicals from the Nineteenth Century. They offered the novelty of comics, but did not neglect some tradition, nor did they ignore things that were happening at school. They struck this balance between education and entertainment.

At first, these periodicals were not a product that was sold to children directly, but I think that from the 30s children had some pocket money so they could buy stuff themselves. If you look at the pictures that you can find from the 1950s in Barcelona, you can see that children are selling each other their collections and reading them together. Before that, it was an adult organised distribution and, thus,

not only the adult producers but also the adult receivers, the parents, were deciding to get (or not) a *TBO* for the children.

What is clear too is the different social class that the two magazines were catering to. I think that *TBO* was for a wider audience, a bit more cheaply produced than *Corriere dei Piccoli*, although the price was almost the same, 10 or 15 cents during the period that I am researching, which is 1917-1932. But you see in *TBO* that there is a lot of importance given to humour, so children should laugh, and they should laugh quantitatively a lot since the pages were packed with gags and other elements. While in *Corriere dei Piccoli* what you see is a meticulously curated material, presented in a visually pleasing and refined manner. You also see a lot more cut outs in *TBO*, because these children probably could not afford to buy something other than paper toys, while *Corriere dei Piccoli* bursted of advertisements for real guns to play with, real airplanes or real cameras, which costed a lot of money. It is interesting to look at these periodicals because they reflect the leisure time activities that were there for the children at that time.

And then, in the case of Spain, I was able to confront *TBO* with *BB*, which is the female version that was only published for 5 years (1920-1925). *BB* would change comics a lot more, adding in rhymed verses and so on. These rhymes were less there in *TBO*, so we also see that, apparently, the balance between education and entertainment was differently struck in a female periodical, format and content was clearly gendered.

**Interviewer:** So, there were gender differences between what was expected from the children?

**Eva:** Absolutely. Although *TBO* said that it was a magazine for both, and it was, from the moment they made this girl's magazine (1920-1925) you really see that they publish activities for girls that are very much about decoration and domesticity. They are preparing the girl for her future role as a mother, a housekeeper, someone who decorates the home, so it is a nice place to be in.

I read an article about the idea of bedroom culture (McRobbie & Garber, 1976); girls were contained in their bedroom, in a sense, by their magazines, as a kind of protective environment, whereas boys would be encouraged to go out in the world and go on adventures. In this case, maybe we can speak of home culture, relegating girls to domestic space.

**Interviewer:** Do you think children stick to the periodicals assigned to their gender?

**Eva:** Of course not, that is the difficult part of the kind of research that I am doing. I cannot access real readers' experiences. I do think that they swapped and that they read whatever they could read. I also do not think that, because there is an activity in a periodical, a girl would do it, they could easily ignore it.

However, it is interesting and undeniable that these tropes were present everywhere. Even if you did not like it as a girl or as a boy, it was very hard to escape it because of its omnipresence. I have investigated French-language and German-language periodicals from the end of the nineteenth century until mid-twentieth century and all the activities for girls were very much the same: cooking, knitting, embroidering, dolls... very stereotypical.

**Interviewer:** Talking about the audience, you said that these periodicals appear in a timing in which a lot of people are illiterate, which includes children and adults. Some adults might have read some of the periodicals. What makes them comic magazines for children?

**Eva:** The branding. For example, *Corriere dei Piccoli* means "messenger of the little ones". It depended on the still-existing newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, this major journal from Milan. So that is one thing, the name. Maybe that is less evident for *TBO*, and that is an interesting contrast, but *TBO* also used to refer to children in the beginning. The first issue was published with a subtitle, "Seminario Festivo Infantile", and with "festivo" meaning humorous. In *TBO* there is a lot of influence of internationally circulating gags that were not specifically for children, so in the case of *TBO* I would talk more about family entertainment.

I think that what made them for children is a very relevant question which has to do with the European tradition. These magazines, these periodicals, were something for children, even when they did not contain comics. In Europe this tradition continues from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and in the twentieth century the novelty of comics is introduced. Does that mean that only children read them? Of course not, I am sure that they circulated in the whole family. For example, *Corriere dei Piccoli* in the beginning had a wrapping of publicity, so that when I was reading it and you were my mother you could look at products for your hair or skin, for example. That is also why these magazines are worthy of our attention, they are not only balancing entertainment and education, but they are also caught between adult press and children's press, between a family product and a child-specific product. You could see that segmentation of the press specialising more and more, and that this continues in the 40s, 50s, 60s, with specific products created for very

specific groups. Like romance comics magazines from the 1950s, that is for a specific age group of adolescent girls, young adults, females.

Your question also reminds me of when I was in the archives. I was shocked that *TBO* contained very racist gags. There is also the influence of fascism in *Corriere dei Piccoli*. In *TBO* I also saw jokes on suicide and someone killing himself. These things nowadays would be deemed completely inappropriate for children.

**Interviewer:** So, they were trying to keep this double audience.

**Eva:** Trying to or did not really know how to make a child-specific project. That is interesting in that period, with that specific period before the civil war. It has to do with the fact that later, in Spain, it would not be possible anymore to joke about these things. And then you get humorous comics like *13, Rue del Percebe*<sup>2</sup>, which are funny, but they are a slice of life: it is humour that does not harm anyone.

**Interviewer:** I understand that the adult view was very central to the magazines, because as you say it was “restrictive, instructional, escapist entertainment”. How much of the content was shaped towards the potential adult that had to fulfil a specific social expectation or gender role? How was this reflected on the characters? Or, in other words: how were the child characters in the magazine and how were the adult characters?

**Eva:** It is difficult to give a general answer because there were very different series. In *TBO* there is more of the mischief gags going on through the period that I have seen. The interesting thing for me was that, in *TBO*, you do not really move away from the gags, at least not in the period that I researched. There is no ongoing narrative in comics form. While in *Corriere dei Piccoli* I did see that building up of continuity since they published ongoing comics, but it was also a lot more moralizing. I have published an article (Van de Wiele, 2021) on how *Little Nemo*, the American character, was used by Italian authors and they really turned it into a moralising character. You see that the story is taken over and domesticated, globalised to the Italian context, while lecturing the Italian child.

In general, there are a lot more child characters in the Italian comics magazine than in the Spanish comic magazine. While *Corriere dei Piccoli* published children’s comics starring children, *TBO* published a lot more family stories. In the Spanish comics magazine, there was one serial character, a boy called *TBO*, who

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<sup>2</sup> 13, Rue del Percebe was a comic-story created by Francisco Ibáñez, first published in 1961.

starred in two series: one was called *La varita mágica de TBO*, in which he helped children in tales that were quite educational at the time and that offered an element of fantasy. A series like this one, was clearly for younger children, but other series in *TBO* were for an older public, so *TBO*'s was catering to a mixed group of readers with different ages. One of *TBO*'s most famous series, *La familia Ulises*, was on a middle-class family and, maybe, you could say that the children have a secondary role in that family. There is another series, which was *Los grandes inventos del TBO (por el Profesor Franz de Copenhague)*, about inventions which were absurd, offering super complex inventions to create machines to do things that you and I can do, like a machine that can bring a napkin to your mouth. Again, it is a kind of humour that the child reading the page appreciates, but I do not think that a young child would understand the irony of it.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that, because one was more for entertainment and the other for education, the characters who were children were supposed to be role models?

**Eva:** In every issue of these periodicals, many ways of approaching the child can be found, so it would be wrong to say that *TBO* was purely entertaining and *Corriere dei Piccoli* was exclusively educating. An issue of *TBO* could consist of comics about family humour or entertaining gags, but then there would also be a bricolage section about, for example, *The three Wise Kings*, which you could interpret as an instrument of a religious inculcation. Within every issue of the periodicals there is more happening than just this generalization, but if you contrast them, you can absolutely see that the balance is different.

**Interviewer:** Some things made the periodicals a literary toy: its price, its material, its characteristics... Considering contemporary comics magazines for children, how different do you think that the reading experience of children nowadays is?

**Eva:** I ended my PhD defense presentation with some examples of current magazines, like *Biscoto* or *Internazionale kids*, and I saw a lot of similarities, especially with respect to the edutainment sections. There is a good example of a contemporary *Corriere dei Piccoli* in a sense: *Internazionale* is this magazine for adults about international news translated in Italian and *Internazionale kids* is the version for kids. I know some Italian families who currently have a family subscription to it, so clearly parents and children decide together that they should get a subscription, and it has all kinds of texts (translated international articles, posters, correspondence section, etc.), but it also has *fumetto*, a comics section. There is on-going

comic series and there are gags, or just comics that finish after one or a couple of pages. The informational texts are a major part of the magazine, but you also see sections like a correspondence section, answered by an adult and a peer. And there is more, there are reviews by children of books, games, etc., there are DIY sections (for example, how to make a paper airplane). In sum, there are still elements of early-twentieth-century magazines in nowadays comics magazines, they did not reinvent them entirely.

**Interviewer:** Another interesting idea is the musicality that you talk about with the traditional songs and poetic rhymes, or even through connections of the image and the text. Do you think this musicality has changed once the text was put into the speech balloons or in contemporary magazines now?

**Eva:** I think that the comics medium has always tried to incorporate some kind of audio experience, be it through rhymed verses or when we see speech balloons and they are coming from different mouths, I do not think that in your head they have the same tone. I have a good concrete example of a contemporary product for children. In the wonderful German magazine, *Polle*, Ferdinand Lutz and Dominik Merscheid have explicitly augmented the possibility of reading, so they publish a comic which is sometimes a song, or they read the comic out loud, with different voices and audio effects, and there is a QR code leading to that audio experience. I think that it is something that has always been there in the minds of comics artists and magazine makers, and nowadays we just have other ways of exploring that audio experience. It is the same as turning a comic into a game, trying to find intermedial adaptations, or amplifying the narrative experience.

**Interviewer:** Is there a way in which you have seen authors using the image to make this musicality, as in the chapter you show how they have more than one figure to represent a repetition [see Figure 1]?

Figure 1. La mattinata di Titina by Antonio Rubino from Corriere dei Piccoli (1919)



Source: Van de Wiele, 2022, p.195.

**Eva:** I think it is thought-provoking that there is no songs or audio used for the pleasure of this augmenting experience, it is more like a school formula. The image adds to that but is very educational and less entertaining. I think that, for example, if you use *TikTok* to learn about a specific topic, probably there will be memes or little videos about it, so we could find a contemporary version of this as well.

**Interviewer:** Connecting the conversation to the importance of education of these periodicals, I guess that these were relevant because there was a lot of illiteracy. I have also read that they influenced a lot of people who later became writers for children, like Gianni Rodari. What do you think was the impact on education of these periodicals?

**Eva:** I could only speak of the few testimonies that I found of people saying that they learned how to read with *TBO* or *Corriere dei Piccoli*. In general, those

are famous people, like Gianni Rodari or Italo Calvino, who said that their creativity was born when they could only look at the images. Calvino said that, actually, from the moment he could read the text he was disappointed by it, because it did not add an extra layer for him, while he said that the images before had spoken so much to his creativity, to his imagination, that he even imagined different stories merging and made his own stories about it. That can also happen: when you read the text and it is very banal or it does not add an extra layer to the images, then you are disappointed. There are many scholars who have talked about how they learnt how to read with comics (like Kai Mikkonen), and sometimes they talk about how their parents or adults were reading with them and stressing those words that might be difficult.

I think that, in the case of Italy, it is interesting that there was not only a lot of illiteracy but, also, a lot of people did not speak standard Italian. It is not only about language but also about teaching the correct language.

**Interviewer:** Did it have a function of bringing education to everyone?

**Eva:** Yes, the only question then is how far did it go? Barcelona was a hub, Milan was a hub, and these magazines were distributed all over the country, so if we had a bigger correspondence section I could have seen where these kids were from. For example, for Italy we know that there was a correspondence section from a woman called Paola Lombroso (for further information, read the section “Corresponding in CdP: A Collaborative, Educational Project” in Van de Wiele, 2022) and although she left the magazine after a couple of years, she established a library project to get books to even very remote village schools. There was absolutely a democratising social project component to it, even if it was not linked to *Corriere dei Piccoli* anymore. Regarding *TBO*, I do not know; it was published in Barcelona and circulated all over the country, but whether it reached those children with a school in which they did not even have a book, that I cannot know.

**Interviewer:** Thinking about children that were active readers, you said that there were some correspondence and interactions. You also talked about how they were selling each other the books in the street.

**Eva:** That is from the 50s though, we do not have examples about it in the earlier period. But it is not because you are not selling it in the street that you are not reading it as peers. There is this lovely picture of a photographer, Margaret Michaelis, who was in Barcelona in *the 1930s* and took pictures of children in the Raval neighbourhood [see Figure 2]. These children are exchanging, holding

*tebeos*, while people are walking the streets, holding bags of food. I thought the juxtaposition was interesting. They are in the street and for them the periodical is a consumer item, but also a social event that would involve friends.

Figure 2. Children reading *tebeos* in the street in 1934



Source: Michaelis, 1934.

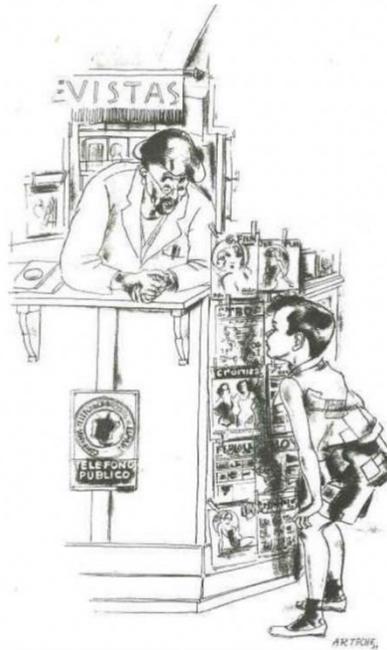
**Interviewer:** So, it is very likely that they were sharing them in many ways.

**Eva:** Yes, we cannot know just how many children read one issue but only the fact that you had to go or be around a kiosk. There are nice examples of that. These are fiction examples [see Figures 3 and 4], but you must imagine that there were a lot of kids like this kid in the figure, that was just browsing and not buying. And then, there is the one from Paco Roca's graphic novel (about the 1950s) which shows that the mother buys this boy a magazine that he wants because he is asking for it [see Figure 3]. The child is in charge of the family money in that sense; while the first kid probably did not have money for it and just tried to have a look at the magazines.

We cannot access real readers, but we can try to find photographic clues, in photographic archives. Specially photos of kiosks or selling points, which give some information by looking at which magazines were on display, which other products

were sold, and you see that these children were gathered around the stall, were not only magazines were sold but also some candy.

Figure 3. Fiction example in which children interact with comic magazines



Source: Van de Wiele, 2022, page 249.

Figure 4. Fiction example in which children interact with comic magazines



Source: Van de Wiele, 2022, page 249.

**Interviewer:** Now, kiosks are different. Maybe, as comics are published by book editors and sold in bookshops, their reception is not the same.

**Eva:** Absolutely, our consumption of comics has changed. The place where you get it is different. When you could buy comics in the street, the fact that readers would gather there meant that it was more of a social thing. Whereas when you go to a bookshop nobody will enter in that process or ask you why you are buying a comic or graphic novel. It becomes a lot more individualistic and book-format oriented. I also think that it puts it more into adult control again, as children do not go buy the comics by themselves nowadays. Also, children's consumption of comics is happening on the internet more, with webtoons and web comics. That is, again, one comic by one person that you are following, and not an entire leisure time product that offers different experiences. Hence, the importance of investing in subscriptions to magazines like *Polle* or *Internazionale Kids*.

**Interviewer:** I would like to know more about the process of your research. Could you describe, generally, the process that you follow to study these periodicals and the difficulties you found?

**Eva:** I must confess that when I started my PhD, I had no idea of what the material was like, and the difficulty was that it was not here (in Belgium).

Luckily, in the first year, I did archival stays both in Spain and Italy: I was in Madrid, Barcelona and Turin. In Turin there is a museum of school history which also is a *fundazione Tancredi di Barolo*, a foundation with a collection full of very valuable picturebooks and children's magazines, like *Corriere dei Piccoli*, but they were bound. So, the first thing that you encounter when you go to an archive is that you do not really find the magazines as separate issues, but that they are in big, thick packs of a year of publishing. For example, in the *Biblioteca Nacional* in Madrid they are in bound, big hard cover volumes. Immediately, you get a distorted impression as a researcher because you can never access the real experience. I think it is important to be conscious about the fact that you are reading a bound volume.

The second thing was that it is not very easy to browse the material in the archives. You have these hard cover volumes and, for example, the *Biblioteca Nacional* impedes to take pictures and only allows to ask for scanned pages, which involves a challenge. I wanted to take as many pictures as I could, and not scans, because I wanted to have as much material as I could of *TBO* and *Corriere dei Piccoli* to then be able to do my research in a very slow way, which you cannot do

in those two or three weeks in which you are in Italy or Spain as you have to ask for the scanned pictures. Back in Belgium, I used a free program called *Tropy*. You incorporate your pictures of the issues of the periodicals into *Tropy*, create a library in which you put all the issues, and tag and metadata them. What I did was adding the issue, the name and the year, and I started to tag the things that I saw. The problem was that I did not decide on the tags beforehand, I did not know what I was going to find. I ended up with 5000 tags, but this also made sure that I did not have to look at the pictures repeatedly. For instance, at the end of the first year of my PhD there was a Cambridge conference about comics and travel. I just looked up “plane”, “airplane”, “car”, etc. and I ended up with a lot of examples from *TBO* in which children were invited to engage with modern transport systems. A tool like *Tropy* allows researchers to search, export, and share their data without having to go back leafing through all the issues, which you sometimes cannot do because you do not have them. It makes the work a bit more manageable, but I think that it is important to know what you look for.

**Interviewer:** I am wondering how your research contributed to your own knowledge and experience. What would you highlight that you gained from doing this huge research project on periodicals for children?

**Eva:** I think I gained a lot of insights and had the pleasure to meet an enormous number of inspiring scholars. I think that the most interesting insight is that the periodical is a format that allows for theoretical inquiry which you can also apply to other forms of children’s literature. At the same time, it can be linked to book history, to film studies, periodical studies, toy history, etc. For example, I discovered researchers studying 19<sup>th</sup> Century picturebooks, which at first sight you would think has little to do with my research, and realised that their studies can be linked to my research. Or I talked to a film scholar and she helped me figure out some of the cinematic references that were very present in *TBO* (Van de Wiele, 2020). Through studying a specific object, I got more general knowledge about diverse research fields. That is the most interesting about comics, that they are inherently interdisciplinary, and that they demand you, as a researcher, to delve into different disciplines and to formulate educated guesses based on these disciplines.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for this interview. I believe that your insight is of great interest to understand the social and educational role of comic magazines during the period that you studied, as well as their impact on nowadays comic culture in Italy and Spain. I am looking forward to learn about your postdoctoral research.

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