

<b>Institution:</b>	University of Northumbria at Newcastle
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b>	36A - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies
<b>Title of case study:</b> Enhancing Awareness of Gender-related issues at the Thought Bubble Comics Festival	
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Dr Mel Gibson's research on comics and gender has influenced Thought Bubble - an organisation that runs the UK's largest and most high-profile comic and graphic novel festival - to re-focus its marketing and festival content to appeal to female audiences. Thought Bubble is dedicated to promoting comics and related media as an important national and international cultural art-form. In a medium stereotyped as profoundly male, Gibson's research has provided the basis for Thought Bubble's distinctive approach to gender-related issues as they relate to the world of comics, their creators and their readers, with implications particularly for the marketing of the festival.</p>	
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Gibson, who has worked at Northumbria in Film, Literature and Childhood Studies since 1998, is a key figure in UK comics scholarship and has a strong record of dissemination of her research to non-academic audiences and to professionals within the comics industry, primarily through her popular website Dr Mel Comics. Her expertise in her subject field has underpinned the impact described in this case study. Gibson's research is ongoing and there are significant outputs in the current REF census period. This work has predominantly focused on gender, comics and childhood, with a significant emphasis on addressing myths and prejudices about the comic form and its audiences, for example, Gibson, 2003b.</p> <p>The most important focus of Gibson's research regarding the impact described in this case study has been around comics and female audiences. A dominant discourse about comics within the industry and within much comic-based criticism is that girls and women do not read comics to any great extent. As a female reader of comics Gibson wanted to investigate this assumption through her research. This involved uncovering via archival research a "lost" history of comics for the female reader (Gibson, 2000a, 2000b, 20003a). This research has also involved working with female readers of all genres of comic as well as engaging with female creators of comics (Gibson, 2010).</p> <p>Her research findings have established that there was, and is, a significant female comics readership in Britain and also identified and analysed the kind of narratives which were and are popular with female readers, revealing a diverse range of engagement with many genres including superhero titles and autobiography. The overall effect of Gibson's research has been to challenge those discourses and approaches to comics that have excluded or marginalised women as both readers and creative figures nationally and internationally.</p>	
<p><b>3. References to the research</b> (copies available on request)</p> <p>Gibson, M (2000a) 'On British comics for girls and their readers'. In Moody, N. (ed.) <i>Consuming for Pleasure: Selected essays on popular fiction</i>, John Moores Press.</p> <p>Gibson, M (2000b) 'Reading as Rebellion: The Case of the Girl's Comic in Britain'. <i>International Journal of Comic Art</i> Vol.1. No.2. Fall, pp 135-151.</p> <p>Gibson, M (2003a) 'What became of Bunty? The emergence, evolution and disappearance of the girls' comic in post-war Britain.' In Bearne, Eve and Styles, Morag (eds.) <i>Art, Narrative and Childhood</i>. Trentham Books. <a href="http://www.amazon.co.uk/Art-Narrative-Childhood-Morag-Styles/dp/1858562635">http://www.amazon.co.uk/Art-Narrative-Childhood-Morag-Styles/dp/1858562635</a></p> <p>Gibson, M (2003b) "'You can't read them, they're for boys!'" British Girls, American Superhero Comics and Identity'. <i>International Journal of Comic Art</i> Vol.5. No.1. Spring.</p> <p>Gibson, M (2010) 'What Bunty did next: exploring some of the ways in which the British girls' comic</p>	

protagonists were revisited and revised in late twentieth-century comics and graphic novels' *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* Routledge, pp. 121-135.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2010.528639>

#### 4. Details of the impact

The focus of this case study is Thought Bubble, a non-profit-making organisation which runs one of Britain's most important comic festivals and also houses the British Comics Awards. The festival has significant international reach. In 2012 it had 75 major speakers participating, including visitors from France, Spain, Brazil, Canada, the USA, Japan and China, as well as an additional 200 creators selling their comics and running workshops. Sponsors include the Arts Council, the University of Chichester and major international comic distributor Diamond.

Gibson's research has contributed to the development of Thought Bubble's distinctive approach, most evidently in the foregrounding of gender-related elements in the programming of its yearly festival. The festival started in 2007 as a one-day event attracting around 500 people. Gibson's body of research on the roles of women and girls in the world of comics was presented to festival staff, including the festival director in 2008. The research indicated that a female audience existed for comics to a much greater extent than previously supposed and that it could be fostered by changing the tone and marketing of the festival and also by emphasising women creators in the programming.

The presentation of research led directly to Gibson's organising and chairing a regular "Women in Comics" panel for the festival from 2009 to 2012 that debated issues of gender and diversity. This has become an increasingly important aspect of the festival, attracting major women comic creators such as Alison Bechdel, Robin Furth and Mary Talbot and with its audience rising from 60 in its first year to a current 250. It has been consistently shaped by Gibson's research findings, which have been used to form the agendas that are addressed by each of the panels. Examples of this include a panel on generation and comics, influenced by Gibson, 2010 (an article which addressed the influences on women creators) and a panel on the supposed lack of female creators and readers, which drew upon Gibson 2003a, 2003b, 2010. The Director of the Thought Bubble Festival from its inception, confirms that: "*Mel's research gave me considerable impetus to shape the form of the festival by changing the tone of the marketing and forefronting women creators in the programming... This led to the start of the Women in Comics panel, chaired by Mel and to our annual banner used on the website and all publicity for the festival always featuring/being created by a woman.*"

Elsewhere the Thought Bubble Director has noted that the "Women in Comics" panel: "*has been a distinctive feature of Thought Bubble*" and that "*the celebration of female creators has acted as a 'shop-front' for the festival, showing visitors and guests that this is a female friendly event*" (source: personal correspondence between the Director of Thought Bubble and Gibson).

Furthermore, Thought Bubble's Assistant Director has confirmed that Gibson's contributions to the festival programme were: "*instrumental in allowing us to successfully attain (and retain) the necessary (Arts Council) funding to allow us to both succeed in our initial core aims, and also to expand and grow as an organisation.*"

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- Letter of support from Thought Bubble Director, corroborating impacts claimed on foregrounding of gender-related elements in festival programming.
- Personal correspondence between Thought Bubble Director and Gibson, corroborating impacts claimed on foregrounding of gender-related elements in festival programming.
- Letter of support from Thought Bubble Assistant Director, corroborating impacts claimed on foregrounding of gender-related elements in festival programming.
- Festival documentation relating to Women in Comics Panel, available on request.