



The Ambivalence of the Internet and Technology upon the Comic Industry

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Abstract. The advent of the internet and technology has brought ambivalence to the comic industry. On one hand, they provide consumers and comic enthusiasts with easy access to their favorite comics without needing to visit bookstores. On the other hand, they have exacerbated the issue of piracy. This paper is based on a qualitative comparative study, comparing two types of official and illegal comic publications on internet platforms, including Webtoon, CLAYO, Mangareader, Mangafox, and Bato. This paper outlines the distribution process of legal printed and digital comics and reveals how comic piracy is perpetrated and proliferated, particularly on internet-based platforms. This study shows that the ambivalence of technological development is inevitable in the comic culture industry. Piracy in the world of comics is inevitable. Illegal groups assume that translations, re-uploads and the like will make it easier for readers to understand comics, but they are still illegal. On the other hand, legal comics have also taken various measures to minimize piracy. Comic industries, especially those that operate online, have implemented measures to protect their authors' works from piracy. For instance, Webtoon, a platform created by Naver, has disabled the screenshot function on readers' devices, preventing them from capturing images of comics that could be misused

Keywords: Comic industry; internet; piracy; ambivalence.

Article History

Submitted
November 1, 2024

Accepted
December 20, 2024

Published
December 23, 2024

1. Introduction

Cultural industry continues to be a substantial contributor to the global economy. This sector encompasses a wide range of creative content, from films and music to books and comics (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Comic book industry, as an integral part of this field, has substantially transformed due to rapid evolution of technology. The digitalization and internet removed most of the pre-existing barriers in the process of information exchange (Hardy, 2019). Traditionally confined to print formats, comics now thrive in the digital realm, offering both paid and free options. This dynamic transformation presents an exciting field for exploration and analysis.

These technological advancements in the comic industry present a complex picture. While technology promises to revolutionize the industry by facilitating production,

distribution, and global reach, it also introduces new challenges. The digital age makes it possible to expand the readership and make comics more accessible by eliminating the need for physical bookstores. However, the ease of digital distribution has also exacerbated piracy issues, posing a significant threat to the industry's revenue and creators' livelihoods. According to copyright law (see for example Towse 2002), scanning and translating comic works without the authors' consent could be categorized as conduct of piracy and a violation of copyright law. This piracy issue harms the authors. For comics creators, piracy may become a 'stumbling block' of their creative career.

Applying Paul Virilio's dromology theory, this paper discusses this comics piracy as one of the consequences of technological development. According to Virilio (2007) 'dromology' is the theory that investigate the 'logic of speed' of transport, communications, and technology, and how such increasing speed transform society. Virilio (2007) also delves into the concept of accident, arguing that it is through accidents, rather than control, that societies truly solidify. He posits that accidents are inherent to technology itself; the invention or adoption of a new technology is also the invention and adoption of a new accident. Thus, the risk of accidents is an unavoidable consequence of technological advancement.

2. Literature review

Previous studies discussing comics and their relation to piracy were conducted by several scholars. Hardy (2020) investigated the impact of piracy on the American comic book market, emphasizing the role of digital formats. Kataoka (2017) provided a comprehensive overview of comic piracy's evolution in the digital age, highlighting the role of scanlators and aggregator websites. She characterized this phenomenon as a double-edged sword, simultaneously expanding market reach and infringing upon copyright.

Delwiche (2014) delved into the motivations of individuals who scan and distribute comic books. This research claims to challenge the view that digital piracy should be interpreted as a form of cultural resistance. The phenomenon of comic book scanning makes more sense when understood as a manifestation of fan behavior. Comic book pirates are fans rather than revolutionaries. While Rozynek & Hardy (2023) identified the reasons why people consume pirated comics. This research also tried to offer solutions for people who use pirated comics by experimenting with the level of satisfaction with official comics. This study indicated that the high consumption of pirated comics is hindered by the higher price of official comics. However, by providing the experience of reading free official comics for some time, some customers began to switch to the official site.

Other studies discussed the digitalization era for comic industries. For example, Jeong (2020) explored the social, global, and technological conjuncture of comic industry, exemplified by the globalization processes of Korean webtoons. The study explained that the driving forces of Korean webtoons' global expansion include the growth of smartphone penetration, the emergence of a paid service model, and the rise of China's pan-entertainment strategy.

In the Indonesian context, Zainal Abidin Arief, Endin Mujahidin, and Rudi Hartono have measured how much influence the digital comic learning media had on Indonesian students' (Arief *et al.*, 2022). Using experimental method, this study concluded that there

was an increase in the students' English language learning outcomes in the experimental class, probably caused by digital comic media.

3. Methods

This research is qualitative, aiming to understand interpretations at a particular point in time and in a particular context (Merriam, 2002: 4). This research started in December 2020 and lasted until August 2024. In the initial stage, I observed various comic platforms, both legal and illegal, including Webtoon, Ciayo, Mangareader, Mangafox, and Bato. After conducting an extended observation of the comic industry, a mapping of how the occurrence of accidents within the global comic book industry was conducted. From this mapping, I may observe the legal and illegal contestations of the comic industry. The data generated from the observation and mapping process were analyzed with the help of Paul Virilio's dromology theory. In addition, I have also conducted an interview about comic publishing processes with Ulil Maulida, a former senior editor at Bentang Pustaka Publishing House.

4. Results and discussions

The global comic industry continues to expand today, thriving across various media beyond traditional print. Korean comics operate on two levels: those produced in an assembly line manner in master cartoonist studios, designed primarily for the rental market, and those reprinted from comics magazines, meant to be purchased in bookstores (Lent, 1999). However, the emergence of digital comics marked a turning point. Known as webtoons, these comics or animations are published by chapter on several Korean websites, including Naver and Daum. Webtoons also referred to as internet comics or webcomics, debuted in 2002 and have since experienced rapid growth. The spread and distribution of digital comics, including webtoon are getting wider and faster. The necessary conditions for the growth of webtoons were created by the digital infrastructure in the form of the spread and speed of broadband Internet and the spread of smartphones. Today, the market for Korean webtoons is booming, with revenue estimated to reach up to 150 billion Won. The Korean government has identified webtoons as one of the fastest-growing sectors of the cultural industry. In May 2014, they announced a new public subsidy and investment program to support and promote webtoon creators (Lynn, 2016).

Indonesia is one of the countries with the most digital comic readers. Users of the digital comic platform in Indonesia averaged between 11 and 25 years old (Mataram & Ardianto, 2019). Before Line Webtoon dominating Indonesian comic platform, Indonesia had already developed a digital comic platform called Ngomik.com. The beta version of Ngomik.com launched in 2010, involving 500 comic artists and 2,700 users. However, the platform eventually became inactive. Ciayo.com, another local comic platform, had success stories in its early periods, but unfortunately ceased operations in August 2020, becoming one of the many businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the closure of these platforms, Line Webtoon emerged as the dominant force in digital comic industry in Indonesia, solidifying its position as the leading platform.

4.1. The flow of printed comics in Indonesia

There are slight differences in the distribution flow of local comics and translated comics in Indonesia. The translation of comic books requires the consideration of all the characteristics of the source text and the multimodality aspect (Larasati & Rasikawati, 2022). In the context of translated comics, the process starts with editors searching for comics in a language suitable for the Indonesian market. The translation uses colloquial language as a stylistic device for a more natural sound in the target language (Setiawan & Darmansyah, 2021). When an editor finds a comic that resonates and has never been published in Indonesia, they initiate correspondence with the comic's publisher to propose a collaboration. If the publisher and the comic artist agree to the collaboration, the publisher sends the comic file to the editor, who then forwards it to a translator. This translation is not a straightforward task, as it involves more than just converting text from one language to another. A team of editors meticulously reviews the translation to ensure accuracy and cultural relevance before it returns to the main editor.

The editor's role extends beyond editing the translated text; they also review and edit the images. The editor should make sure the targeted audience and purpose, content and theme, tone and mood, stylistic devices, and structure. For instance, if there are images that clash with Indonesian cultural norms, the editor will make necessary adjustments. Suppose a comic is intended for a teenage audience and labeled 'R' (Remaja, meaning teenager), but contains characters wearing inappropriate clothing for Indonesian culture, the editor will modify these images by either covering up the exposed parts or applying a blur effect. Beyond clothing issues, the editor also adapts the story and character behavior descriptions to align with the moral values of Indonesian society. They might remove or alter any content that does not fit these values, ensuring that the comic is suitable for the local audience. Any changes made to the comic are communicated back to the original author, keeping them informed about the modifications made by Indonesian publishers.

In contrast, local comics follow a different distribution flow. Local comic artists often have a more direct route to publication, as they are already familiar with their readers' cultural context and morality standards. This familiarity streamlines the editing process since the content is created with the local market in mind from the outset. For local comics, the process typically involves the artist submitting their work directly to a local publisher. The publisher's editorial team reviews the submission, focusing primarily on the quality of the artwork and the storyline. Since the content is already culturally relevant, there is usually less need for significant alterations. The editorial team might still suggest changes to improve the comic's appeal or to correct any inconsistencies, but these are generally minor adjustments compared to the extensive modifications often required for translated works. At this step, the editor reviews the concept and provides feedback, after which the artist revises the comic based on the agreed-upon suggestions. Once the comic is completed, it undergoes a final round of editing. If the editor deems the comic ready for publication, it moves to the production phase. Following this, the distribution flow mirrors that of imported comics, with the final product being sent to various outlets such as bookstores, comic shops, and online platforms.

Overall, while both local and translated comics undergo rigorous editorial processes, the key difference lies in the level of cultural adaptation required. Translated comics necessitate a thorough review and modification to fit the local context, whereas local comics benefit from the artists' intrinsic understanding of their audience and direct communication

between the artist and editor, resulting in a more straightforward path to publication and distribution.

In the distribution processes, publishers no longer directly handle the distribution of the comic books. Instead, this task is managed by distributors, who are responsible for delivering books to bookstores throughout Indonesia. The role of distributors is crucial, as they must possess a wide network to ensure that the books reach major bookstores. Once the books arrive at the bookstore, their placement is strategic and follows specific guidelines. Books are not simply placed on shelves at random. The arrangement of books within the store is methodical. Bestsellers, or books with the highest sales, are typically displayed prominently on the storefront or front shelves. This prime placement helps attract customers' attention and drive further sales. Even on standard bookshelves, there are specific rules for book placement. New arrivals are placed on shelves that are easily visible and accessible to customers. Over time, as a book's presence in the store extends, its placement moves lower on the shelves. Thus, a book positioned on the bottom row indicates that it has been in the store for a while.

The distribution of books in Indonesia involves a coordinated effort between publishers, distributors, and bookstores. Each agent plays a crucial role in ensuring that books are not only delivered but also displayed effectively to maximize visibility and sales. The determination of book placement involves regular meetings between publishers, distributors, and bookstores. These meetings serve to evaluate which books are performing well and which might need reprinting due to high demand. The collaboration ensures that popular titles remain available and visible, optimizing sales opportunities. Additionally, these meetings address the logistics of book placement and inventory management. Discussions include which books are trending, seasonal sales patterns, and customer preferences. By analyzing sales data and market trends, the stakeholders make informed decisions on which books to promote and how to manage stock levels efficiently.

Distributors play a pivotal role in this ecosystem, bridging the gap between publishers and bookstores. They ensure that books are delivered on time and in good condition. Their extensive network allows for broad distribution, making it possible for books to be available in various regions across the country. This accessibility is vital for reaching a wide audience and maximizing sales potential. Bookstores, on their part, rely on these well-established distribution channels to keep their shelves stocked with a diverse selection of titles. They also use the strategic placement of books to enhance the shopping experience, guiding customers toward new releases and bestsellers. The book distribution division draws the most money, which is around 40-50 percent of the total costs incurred from upstream to downstream, starting from the production of books to the hands of the readers.

In addition to direct sales channels, most publishers today leverage advances in technology to sell books through websites. For instance, Mizan utilizes mizanstore.com to sell books, including comics published by Bentang Pustaka, while Gramedia markets its titles through gramedia.com. Publishers also harness social media platforms like X and Facebook to promote their latest releases. Online store sales typically experience high traffic during promotions or sales events.

4.2. Distribution flow of digital comics

The distribution of digital comics is simpler than that of printed comics. Comic artists under contract with a digital comic platform must upload their work at a specified time, usually once a week. For instance, the comic *'Ngopi Yuk'* by artists Sisifafa and Romy Hernadi is published on the Webtoon platform every Tuesday at 22:00 WIB (GMT+7). Before its closure, Ciayo Comics released comics daily at 17:00 WIB (GMT+7). If a digital comic is imported, it is first translated by the translation team and then released according to the predetermined schedule.

Webtoon provides a language setting that allows readers to select their preferred language for reading comics. The comics available will vary based on the selected language, depending on the availability of translations. For instance, if the app is set to Indonesian, readers can access the comic *'Dracko Diary'*. However, this comic won't be visible when the app is switched to English, as it has not been translated into that language. Moreover, some comics may have more episodes available in one language but fewer in other language settings. For example, a comic might have progressed further in Korean than in English. This discrepancy sometimes leads multilingual readers to change their language settings to access more episodes in a particular language. This feature provides flexibility and encourages readers with diverse language skills to explore a broader range of content. By offering different comics and episodes based on language settings, Webtoon caters to a global audience with varying language preferences. This also emphasizes the importance of translation teams, who work to make popular comics accessible to a wider audience. However, the disparity in the number of episodes across languages highlights the ongoing challenge of keeping translations up to date with the original releases.

In the early days of digital comics, access was either free or required payment. As interest in digital comics grew, platforms began implementing paid systems to compensate comic artists. For example, on Webtoon, readers use credits to purchase coins, which can then be exchanged for access to earlier episodes of comics. For instance, the comic *'iMarried'* required 10 coins to read one episode earlier than those who opted for the free version in 2021. During the period this article was written, July and August 2024, readers can have free access to *'iMarried'*. However, there was a note from Webtoon that starting from August 29, 2024, Webtoon will apply for daily tickets as a form of support for the authors, Angelina and Takoyaki. Similarly, on Ciayo Comics, some comics offered the first three episodes for free, but subsequent episodes required the purchase and exchange of coins. This coin system was designed to support the creators by providing a revenue stream through direct reader contributions.

However, the introduction of paid systems has also led to unintended consequences, such as the rise of comic piracy. Some readers, unwilling or unable to pay for coins, resort to pirating the comics. This piracy undermines the efforts of comic artists and platforms that aim to monetize digital content fairly. The coin system on these platforms reflects a broader trend in digital media, where content creators seek sustainable income through micropayments and subscriptions. While this model has proven effective in many cases, it also highlights the ongoing challenge of balancing accessibility and fair compensation. As digital comic platforms continue to evolve, they must address piracy and explore innovative ways to support artists. By improving accessibility and offering value through exclusive content or enhanced reading experiences, platforms can foster a loyal and paying readership.

4.3. Piracy

Like two sides of a coin, technology brings ambivalence to the comic industry. On one hand, it provides a new platform for comic artists to showcase their work and makes it easier for readers to access these creations. On the other hand, it facilitates opportunities for piracy. Scanlation – stance for scan and translation – groups engage in piracy by scanning printed or digital comics, processing the images with software like Adobe Photoshop, and translating the text from the original language to the target language. These translated comics are then uploaded to sites like bato.to or ahelfulloi.wordpress.com. For example, the comic ‘Wee!!!’ is available on the Indonesia Line Webtoon platform (known as Naver in South Korea), but is not found in the English version of Webtoon. This absence indicates that this comic has not been officially translated into English. However, the English version of this comic can be found on the Mangakalot platform (see Figure 1, 2, and 3). Thus, it can be concluded that the comic ‘Wee!!!’ circulating in Mangakalot is an illegal comic. Even though Webtoon application has been arranged so that users cannot record screens or take pictures of comics on the screen (screenshots); with the sophistication of scanlation group technology, they can still get comic images, translate them into English, and then publish their translated results.

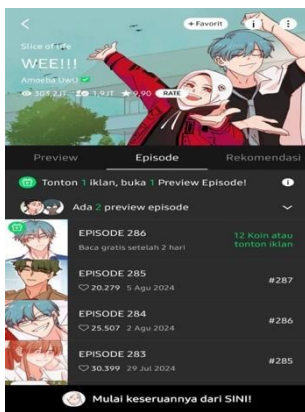


Figure 1. Comic Wee!!! in Webtoon in the Indonesian language setting (Screenshot of Webtoon application, 2024).

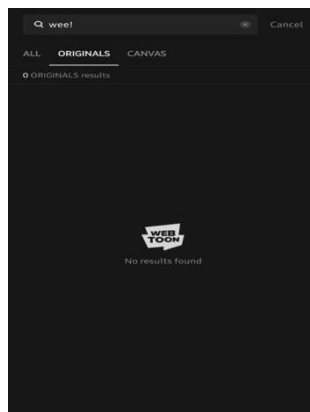


Figure 2. Wee!!! cannot be found in the English language setting in Webtoon (Screenshot of Webtoon application, 2024)



Figure 3. An English version of “Wee!!!” on the Mangakalot (Screenshot of Mangakalot application, 2024)



Figure 4. Aims of the scanlation group (Screenshot of Mangareader application, 2024)

Scanlation groups often justify their piracy by positioning themselves as enthusiasts who want others to enjoy comics for free (Figure 4). These groups see themselves as a community providing free access to manga (Japanese comics) available online. They even encourage readers to contact them if they encounter a comic that requires payment to read. By framing their actions as helping others access English translations of comics without cost, they attempt to rationalize their piracy. They believe they are expanding the audience for these works, giving access to readers who might otherwise never experience them.



Figure 5. Scanlation group supporting the licensed translation (Screenshot of Mangareader application, 2024)

However, this perceived noble intent does not negate the fact that their actions violate copyright laws and undermine the efforts of original creators and legitimate publishers. In some cases, when a comic has been officially translated, scanlation groups cease their translation efforts (Figure 5). While it appears more ethical and supportive to provide links to the original work and support the author, the act of scanning and translating without the author's consent remains unethical and illegal. It disregards the rights of

creators, and the legal frameworks established to protect intellectual property. Ultimately, while scanlation groups may view themselves as champions of free access to comics, their actions have significant negative impacts. They not only break the law but also harm the creators and industries they claim to support. The challenge lies in balancing the desire for widespread access to comics with the need to respect and uphold the rights of those who create them.

These groups understand their activities are illegal. Some even go to the extent of including a message requesting that their scanlations not be uploaded on social media platforms, particularly Instagram (Figure 6). They know that such visibility could lead to their websites being shut down by authorities. In this sense, discussing piracy as a form of an accident that is instead strengthening the bond between the actors of piracy and their consumers, Virilio's statement (2007) that "[...] the accident is also a critical source of solidarity, a binding exception that is the real condition of acceptance" is relevant with the issue. Scanlation groups caution readers to avoid actions that could lead to the takedown of their illegal works. Readers, in turn, agree to these terms because they want to continue enjoying free access to translated comics. They understand that if they report the scanlation group or share the content on social media, it could attract the attention of the original authors and lead to the site being shut down. This would mean losing a source of enjoyment for the readers.



Figure 6. Warning not to repost the scanlation works on social media (Screenshot of Mangareader application, 2024)

As a result, there are only a few instances where scanlation groups are reported or face legal action. The mutual understanding between the groups and their audience helps maintain the clandestine nature of their operations. Readers refrain from publicizing the content to ensure continued access, while scanlation groups benefit from the tacit cooperation of their audience. This dynamic significantly reduces the likelihood of takedowns or court cases involving pirated comics.

Interestingly, their action of piracy does not aim to gain profit. They share their scanlation results on Mangadex or Discord which are free, and both also do not take any profit from their sites. Meanwhile, if the readers access the comics on different platforms or sites, the sites and or platforms will get some benefits from the frequency of people visiting. Therefore, they give warning on the first page of every comic scanlation they upload (Figure 7). On the one hand, the scanlation groups do not want their work results are be used by others to make some profits. However, on the other hand, they harm the original authors of the comics themselves by scanning and translating illegally and violating copyright law.



Figure 7. Warning to the readers to read only on Mangadex (Screenshot of Mangareader application, 2024)

With advances in technology, the process of piracy has evolved further. Numerous applications now scrape comics from websites and update them in real-time, just like the original sites. Readers simply need to download these apps from the Google Play Store to access hundreds or even thousands of comics online for free. Examples of such apps include Manga Reader, Manga Fox, and Manga Geek, among others. In analyzing the probable reason people still commit piracy despite knowing the law and the consequences, we can use Walter Benjamin's (1969) explanation about how painting as an art could bring contemplation,

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such a fusion of visuals is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. (Benjamin, 1969)

Although Benjamin used painting and film as comparisons to illustrate how audiences engage with art, this comparison can also be applied to comics. Despite being a visual medium, comics function similarly to films, with panels that build a storyline. The extensive use of panels and narrative can sometimes lead to a lack of deep contemplation from readers. This lack of contemplation affects not only how viewers appreciate the details and value of the artwork but also their behavior toward it. Proper contemplation can lead to greater respect for both the work and its creators, fostering a sense of appreciation beyond mere enjoyment. As a result, readers who engage thoughtfully are less likely to replicate, translate, or distribute the work illegally.

5. Conclusion

The ambivalence of technological development is inevitable in the comic culture industry. Although on the one hand technology allows comic artists to explore more on their comic, on the other hand, the sophistication of technology also makes it easier for those who will pirate their works and spread their pirated products throughout the world. The availability of technology makes it easier for pirate groups to disseminate unauthorized translations, impacting the revenue of comic artists and official platforms. Despite the benefits of technology in expanding the reach of comics, it also presents challenges in protecting intellectual property and ensuring that creators are fairly compensated for their work. Balancing accessibility with protection against piracy remains a significant issue for the industry.

Piracy in the comic industry is an unavoidable consequence of the rapid advancement of both printed and digital technologies, as described by Virilio's concept of dromology. Systems have been implemented to prevent and control piracy, such as measures taken by Naver (in Korea) and Webtoon (in Indonesia), which prevent users from taking screenshots while accessing their apps. However, as new technologies emerge, so do new forms of piracy. Despite these preventative measures, piracy, as an inherent issue tied to technological progress, cannot be entirely eradicated.

Although scanlation groups aim to provide enjoyment for readers who cannot understand the original language of comics by scanning, redrawing, translating, and sharing their work, their actions remain illegal and infringe on copyright laws due to the lack of authorization from the original authors. According to Walter Benjamin's idea of 'lack of contemplation', this absence of deep reflection might contribute to their behavior. In the end, the occurrence of piracy as an accident in the comic industry is unavoidable.

Notes on Contributors

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