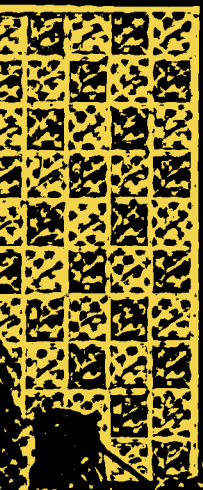




FEDCHUN • QAZZAZ • BAI • WOO



Please ... a  
NO live st  
of any kin  
the panels in  
If you are caught  
you may be as



**A**s comic conventions have grown and arguably mainstreamed over the past twenty years—led in no small part by San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC)—they have necessarily become more complicated organizations. And with great complexity there must come also great policies.

Con policies are guidelines written by convention organizers and communicated to attendees, volunteers, and exhibitors through various means. They're typically a mix of "constitutive" rules that define how the con works and "regulative" rules that govern what people can and can't do in them.\* Sometimes they express events' values; sometimes, they're written to stave off complaints or shield organizers from liability.

But policies don't simply respond to problems "out there" in the world: they also shape how we perceive and understand those problems.†

As **media scholars**, we want to explore how con policies structure these spaces where more and more people encounter, interact with, and purchase entertainment media. As **communication scholars**, we are interested in the policies as texts and as discourse, in how they rhetorically frame the show, its attendees, and their relationship.

This zine uses a quantitative and comparative analysis of a collection of convention policy documents from our archives to set up a qualitative and discursive approach to Comic-Con's policies.

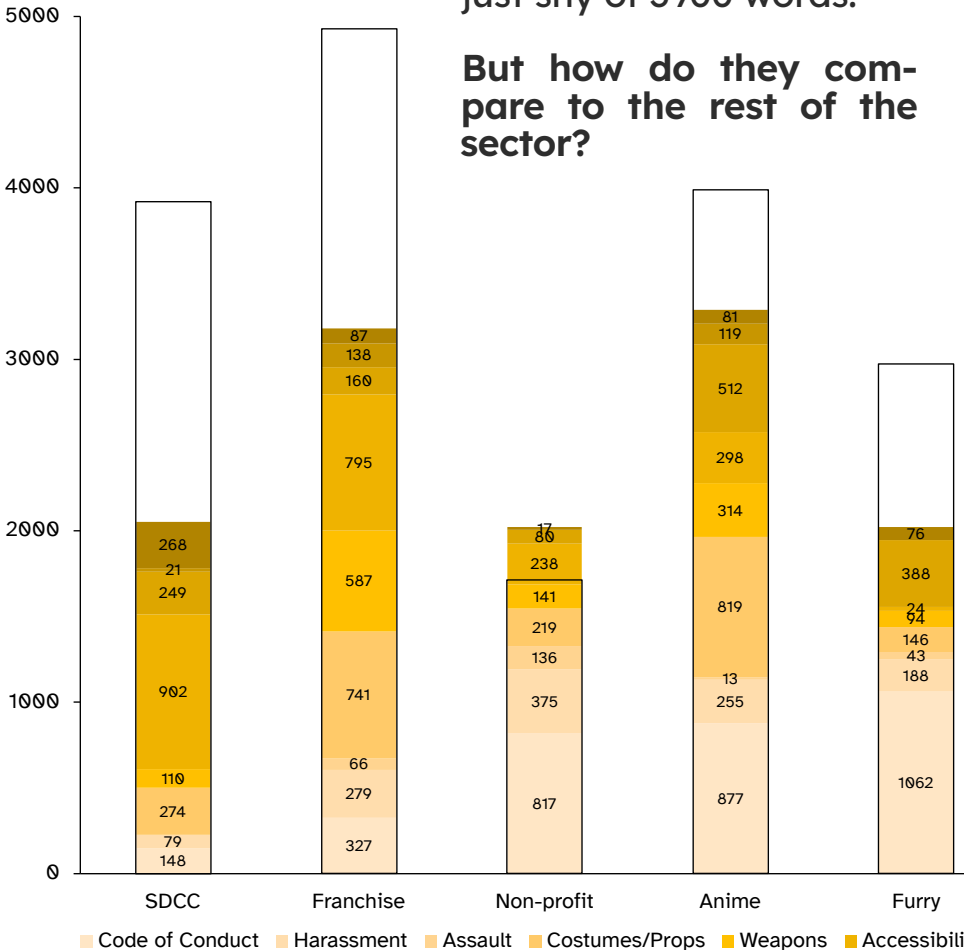
\* John Searle, "Constitutive Rules," *Argumenta* 4, vol. no. 1 (2018): 52. DOI: [10.14275/2465-2334/20187.SEA](https://doi.org/10.14275/2465-2334/20187.SEA).

† Carol Bacchi, "Policy as Discourse: What Does it Mean? Where Does it Get Us?" *Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2000): 47-48.

# Comic-Con in Context

As recently as 1991, the Comic-Con Event Guide downplayed the necessity of formal policies, with organizers saying, “You’re here to have fun. We’re here to make it possible for you to have fun, not impose rules on you.” Since then, as Comic-Con has continued to grow, it has embraced policy making as a necessary precondition for fun events.\*

Like many other fan events, Comic-Con now posts a series of policies on their website, running just shy of 3900 words.

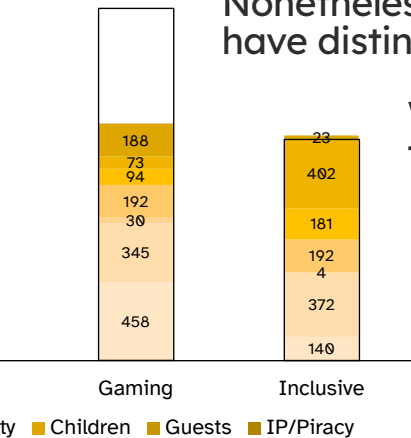


Over the last several years, RoCCET Lab researchers<sup>†</sup> have assembled an archive of **publicly available policy statements from the websites of over 1000 comic cons, festivals, and related fan events.**

Our searches focused on **nine specific policy categories**—codes of conduct, harassment, assault and violence, costumes and props, non-prop weapons, accessibility, children and minors, guest relations, and intellectual property or piracy—though we often grabbed other kinds of text along with them.

The figure below compares SDCC to samples of events in six categories, each of which also captures a little bit of what Comic-Con is like: multi-city franchises, non-profit events, anime, furry, and gaming conventions, and events focusing on historically underrepresented creators and audiences (“inclusive”). Except for SDCC, all word counts are averages.

The **outline bar** shows the **total word count**, while the **shaded segments** show how many words were coded **within each policy category.** (Because text could be coded as belonging to multiple policy types, they sometimes exceed the total.) Nonetheless, the different event types have distinct policy “profiles.”



What do **you** notice looking at the chart?

\* Erin Hanna, *Only at Comic-Con: Hollywood, Fans, and the Limits of Exclusivity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 73.

† See [roccetlab.ca/projects/con-policies](http://roccetlab.ca/projects/con-policies) for full credits.

Our analysis of this data leads us to focus on three key points about SDCC’s policies in the remainder of this zine:

1. in general, a **relatively low proportion** of its policies are coded to **any** of our policy categories;
2. SDCC has an **unusually short code of conduct** and (still) **lacks a substantive harassment policy**; and
3. SDCC devotes a **relatively high proportion** of its policy text to **accessibility services**.

## WHAT EVENTS MAKE UP THE SAMPLES?

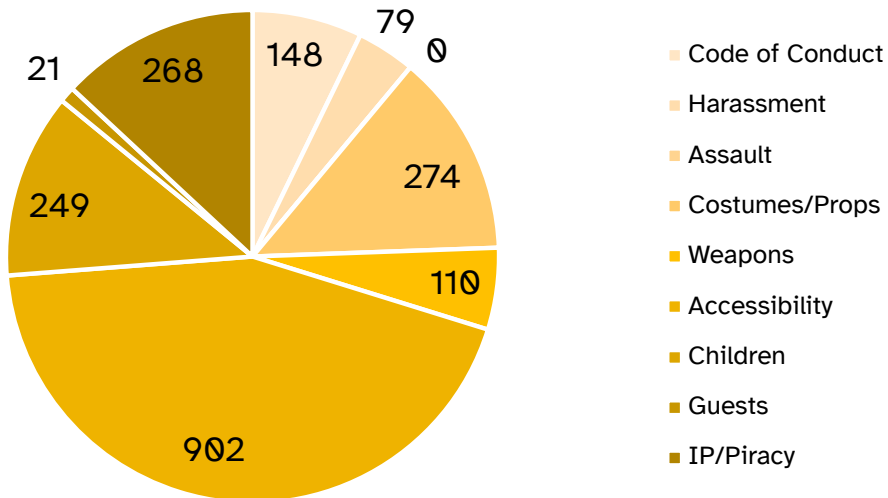
The table below lists the events included in each reference sample. When possible, we included five events we knew from our own experience were significant in the category and five randomly selected from the archive. In some cases (non-profits, inclusive), none were randomly selected and we did not reach a full ten comparators.

<b>Franchise</b>	BrickUniverse, Chicago Comic & Entertainment Expo, Emerald City Comic Con, Fan Expo Boston, Hero Hype Tampa Comic Con, MegaCon Orlando, Ottawa Comiccon, St. Louis Mighty Con, Walker Stalker / Heroes & Villains Fan Fest Chicago, Wizard World
<b>Non-profit</b>	Ama-Con, Capital City Comic Con, Fandomonium, MoCCA Arts Festival, Small Press Expo, Toronto Comic Arts Festival, Uchi-con, Vancouver Comic Arts Festival
<b>Anime</b>	A-Kon, Anime Central, Anime Expo, Anime Festival Orlando, Anime Festival Wichita, Anime Matsuri, Anime Weekend Atlanta, CAPE Anime Con, Kikori Con, Shuto Con
<b>Furry</b>	Anthrocon, Fur-Eh!, Furry Migration, FursonaCon, Fur Squared, Further Confusion, Furry Weekend Atlanta, IndyFurCon, Midwest FurFest, Texas Furry Fiesta
<b>Gaming</b>	BlizzCon, Coulee Con, Dreamation, Fan Lexicon, Gen Con, Nothing But Games – Open Alpha, Origins Game Fair, Oz-Con, PAX West, UBCon
<b>Inclusive</b>	Bay Area Queer Zine Fest, blerDCon, Crippling the Comic Con, Flame Con, GaymerX East, GeekGirlCon, NYC Feminist Zinefest, Queer Between the Covers, Queerness and Games Conference

# SDCC Policy Overview

A visitor to [comic-con.org](http://comic-con.org) looking for SDCC’s policies would first have to select COMIC-CON from the top menu, then mouseover “Attending the Show” to find the general [convention policies](#) document. A second document on the con’s “Deaf and Disabled Services” can also be found under the same drop-down, while the child badge policy is located under the separate Badges menu. While these policies are also provided in the print Events Guide distributed at the show and may be flagged in official social media posts, the website appears to be the primary point of contact—especially in advance of the event—and none of these policies is especially easy to find.

Together, the three documents are 3894 words long. Most content relates to **accessibility** (902 words), **costumes and props** (274 words), and **piracy and intellectual property**, largely focusing on the illicit recording of panels (268 words). At the other end,



there is very little text related to **harassment** (79 words) or **guest relations** (21 words) and none about **assault and violence**.

Before diving into a closer look at SDCC's harassment and accessibility policies, we would like to make some general points about the organization and presentation of the policies.

1. SDCC 2023 is the third in-person Comic-Con since the COVID-19 pandemic's outbreak. For the previous two, organizers maintained mandatory vaccination and masking policies. As of this writing, these policies have become recommendations, but the convention policies still list "COVID-19 Health and Safety" first. This position suggests organizers believe it is either most important or what attendees are most likely to be looking for.
2. After this, however, the rest of the policies are organized **alphabetically** from "Airspace (Balloons, Drones, etc.)" to "Wearable Cameras/ Video Recorders/Camera Phones." This undercuts any sense of priority, with the Code of Conduct falling between a "Badge Privacy Notice" and the "Costume Props Policy."
3. Fourteen of 22 sections in convention policies are titled "No...": No Handouts, No Paging, No Running, etc. Having two-thirds of the headings start with the same word is an odd choice given the alphabetical organization. It also frames the organizers negatively, as the people who say no. This impression is underscored by other negative language, such as "Prohibited Items," "No devices may be...," and "No functional props or weapons are allowed at Comic-Con." What kind of feeling would attendees get when constantly reading "No..."?



4. The organizers rarely explain the reasons for the rules nor the consequences of breaking them. As in the code of conduct, they seem to be treated as “common sense,” leaving attendees to guess why items or actions aren’t allowed at the con.
5. Many of the policies seem to **responsibilize attendees** and **normalize compliance**. The document starts with a header saying, “Comic-Con has a few policies we must all follow that are necessary for the safety and comfort of everyone. We appreciate your cooperation in helping to make Comic-Con a place that everyone can enjoy.” However, this inclusive “we” really means “you.” In our research, we use the term “responsibilization” when policies place the onus for creating and maintaining a safe, comfortable, and accessible convention onto the reader, rather than the event and its organizers. As will be discussed later, this is particularly true for attendees with disabilities. Moreover, requirements to always wear your badge in a visible place and warnings that there will be badge and ID spot checks are not matched with a statement of attendees’ rights or an appeal process.
6. Finally, the policy texts often take on a **legalistic tone**, emphasizing organizers’ minimum duties under the law (such as the Americans with Disabilities Act) and all the things that they “cannot guarantee,” from COVID safety to accessible seating in panels. We appreciate the material and organizational realities that mean these things can’t be guaranteed and concerns about liability for the organization and the venue, among others. Yet, this legalistic tone focused on **CYA** raises the question: **Ultimately, for whose benefit are these policies being written?**

# Harassment

As we have already noted, SDCC’s code of conduct, harassment, and assault policies are among the **shortest** of all categories we examined, with 148, 79, and 0 words, respectively. This is particularly shocking because of the history of grassroots pressure on SDCC—part of the broader **Cosplay is Not Consent** movement—to adopt a comprehensive harassment policy going back to at least the 2008 Con Anti-Harassment Project.

Looking at our comparators, the “**inclusive**” cons (on average) devote a similar amount of text to codes of conduct, but they have less policy text overall and—importantly—almost five times as much text on harassment specifically. **Other non-profit conventions** we reviewed have on average 817 words for their codes of conduct, 375 on harassment, and 136 on assault. Only furry and anime cons have longer codes of conduct, and non-profits have the most text on both harassment and assault.

Of course, the length of a code of conduct or harassment policy may not matter as much if the content of the policy is clear and detailed. The **Cosplayer Survivor Support Network (CSSN)** rates convention harassment policies according to six criteria:

1. Do they have a policy?
2. Is it easy to find?
3. Do they define harassment?
4. Are there consequences listed?
5. Does the policy include staff/volunteers as possible perpetrators of harassment?
6. Is there a specific contact person?

Convention	Listed on Website	Easy to Find	Harassment Defined	Consequences Defined	Issues with Staff	Contact Listed
San Diego Comic Con ('SDCC')	*	👍	👎	👎	👎	👎

SDCC's harassment policies rated by the Cosplayer Survivor Support Network.  
 Source: <https://cosplayer-ssn.org/policies.php#CA>.

As of their last update on December 21, 2022, CSSN had reviewed 706 conventions and found that **only 41 met all six criteria**. Their last review of SDCC's policies was one year ago, and they only received a single thumbs up.

## LET'S LOOK AT SDCC'S CODE OF CONDUCT

"Attendees must respect commonsense rules for public behavior, personal interaction, common courtesy, and respect for private property.

???

OKAY SO YOU MENTIONED IT, BUT WHERE IS THE DEFINITION? WHERE IS THE "COSPLAY IS NOT CONSENT"?

"Harassing or offensive behavior will not be tolerated.

"Comic-Con reserves the right to revoke, without refund, the membership and badge of any attendee not in compliance with this policy.

HERE IS THE CONSEQUENCE FOR NOT RESPECTING "COMMON-SENSE RULES". BUT WHO ACTUALLY RESERVES THIS RIGHT? EVERY VOLUNTEER AT SDCC? ALSO, WHAT IF IT IS NOT AN ATTENDEE THAT IS AT FAULT, BUT RATHER A VOLUNTEER OR SECURITY PERSON?

"Persons finding themselves in a situation where they feel their safety is at risk or who become aware of an at-

tendee not in compliance with this policy should immediately locate the nearest member of security or staff member so that the matter can be handled in an expeditious manner.

**AGAIN, WHAT IF IT IS SECURITY OR A STAFF MEMBER CAUSING THE SITUATION?**

“The Comic-Con Information Desks are located in the lobbies of Halls C and D of the San Diego Convention Center.

**WITH SO MANY CONVENTIONS INCLUDING TEXT AND PHONE HELPLINES OR AN OMBUDSMAN'S CONTACT INFORMATION TO HANDLE REPORTS OF HARASSMENT, WHY ISN'T NORTH AMERICA'S LEADING CON DOING THIS?**

“During show hours you can always find a Comic-Con staff member or security guard at the Information Desks. Please stop by there if you have any questions or concerns.”

Charitably, we can say that SDCC has a harassment policy, that it is relatively easy to find, and it includes consequences. However, it leaves “harassing and offensive behavior” undefined, assumes that only attendees may violate the policy, and fails to provide a reporting process or contact information for a specific support person.

SDCC is increasingly out of step with best practices in the sector. With many resources available for developing harassment policies, there’s no excuse for these gaps.

# Accessibility

SDCC's **Deaf and Disabled Services** page is the longest of the con's policy documents. Unlike the general policy document, the page is not organized alphabetically. Rather, it is broken into sections that make it easier for attendees to navigate (sections include: "Other important things to know," "Who to ask and where to look?" "How do I schedule an ADA hotel Shuttle to pick me up?" etc.). It is not included as part of the other policy statements, instead it stands alone as **its own webpage** with **its own FAQ**.

While SDCC's description of its accessibility services is the most extensive (of **its** policies and of **all the event categories** we examined), the general statement on accessibility is itself **quite brief**:

YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ACCESS LOBBY A FROM ANY OTHER DIRECTION ON TUESDAY, JULY 18.

**Comic-Con International** is dedicated to serving all of its attendees. The Deaf and Disabled Services Department was established to offer a hand to visitors with special needs, including:

- Badge pickup service (including child badges) for those with mobility issues

Significantly, these services are framed as "offering a hand" to those with "special needs," which sounds like a voluntary act of charity rather than a **legal duty** or an **ethical commitment** to equitable, universal access.

Unlike other policies, the Deaf and Disabled Services page provides detailed descriptions on locations and on-site volunteer staff dedicated primarily to the support of people with disabilities. The webpage and the FAQ page mention the Deaf & Disability Services desk located in Lobby A and the volunteers in green polo shirts multiple times.

Despite the detailed description, however, there are some **limitations** to SDCC's accessibility services.

The webpage outlines all the steps disabled people and their companions must take in addition to other regulations to attend the event comfortably. While the convention seems empathetic to attendees with disabilities, it generally places the responsibility of overcoming accessibility challenges on the attendees, and seems to deflect its role in providing an inclusive space for disabled and neurodiverse individuals. For example, the con does not guarantee the availability of accessible seating in panels, captioning of audiovisual presentations, or staff that can accompany those in need of ASL interpretation.

By contrast, some of the answers on the FAQ page show **care** and **trust**, emphasizing that attendees do not need to **prove** they need accommodations with documentations:

▼ What documentation do I need to provide to get an ADA badge?

We do not require documentation. We require honesty.

▼ Do I need to provide any paperwork to use your Sensory Shroud room?

No, you do not.

This is a powerful exception to the generally legalistic tone we observed elsewhere, instead emphasizing inclusive values.

Looking at word counts for accessibility policies, Comic-Con's is longer than the average of the fran-

chise, non-profit, anime, furry, gaming, and inclusive conventions (though five individual events within those samples had more text than SDCC). However, as we saw with the code of conduct / harassment policy, we need to look at policies' substance as well. A higher word count does not necessarily indicate that a convention is ensuring inclusion and accessibility for all—just that it is saying more.

Rather, SDCC assumes that most attendees are able-bodied and neurotypical, with only some having “special needs” that require a helping hand from the organizers. More attention could—and should—be paid to the physical, sensory, and other barriers that people may experience when navigating a busy, crowded space like Comic-Con.

## Conclusion

We are sympathetic to the challenges involved in running any con, let alone one as big and as complicated as SDCC. They might be compared with running a major digital platform like Facebook or Reddit, which similarly invite people into a space to interact with one another.\* As we've learned over the years, good policies are essential to making platforms functional and pleasurable to use, and this is equally true of the “IRL platforms” that conventions annually constitute.

In these pages, we've examined how the overall structure (mostly alphabetical organization) and tone (“negative,” legalistic, and responsabilizing) of

\* Melanie E.S. Kohnen, Felan Parker, and Benjamin Woo, “From Comic-Con to Amazon: Fan Conventions and Digital Platforms,” *New Media & Society* (2023), DOI: [10.1177/146144482311652](https://doi.org/10.1177/146144482311652).

the policy page rhetorically constructs the relationship between the con and its attendees. We have also noted that, in comparison with other fan events, SDCC has a remarkably scanty code of conduct / harassment policy and a relatively lengthy accessibility policy. Our analyses have sought opportunities to improve and strengthen them because policies have material effects on who can attend a convention and what their experience is like.

Despite its size and its integrations with the entertainment media industries, Comic-Con still preserves many aspects of its grassroots, fannish origins. It arguably has its own fandom,\* and these fans' engagement with the organization can be seen in (e.g.) the annual Comic-Con Talkback panel. While recognizing legal, financial and other constraints within which Comic-Con International operates and to which attendees are not entirely privy, can attendees perspectives be better reflected in the policy-making process? If, as Henry Jenkins argues, fandom is a participatory culture, then how can fans participate in the governance of the spaces that matter to them?†

Kate Fedchun  
Jing Bai

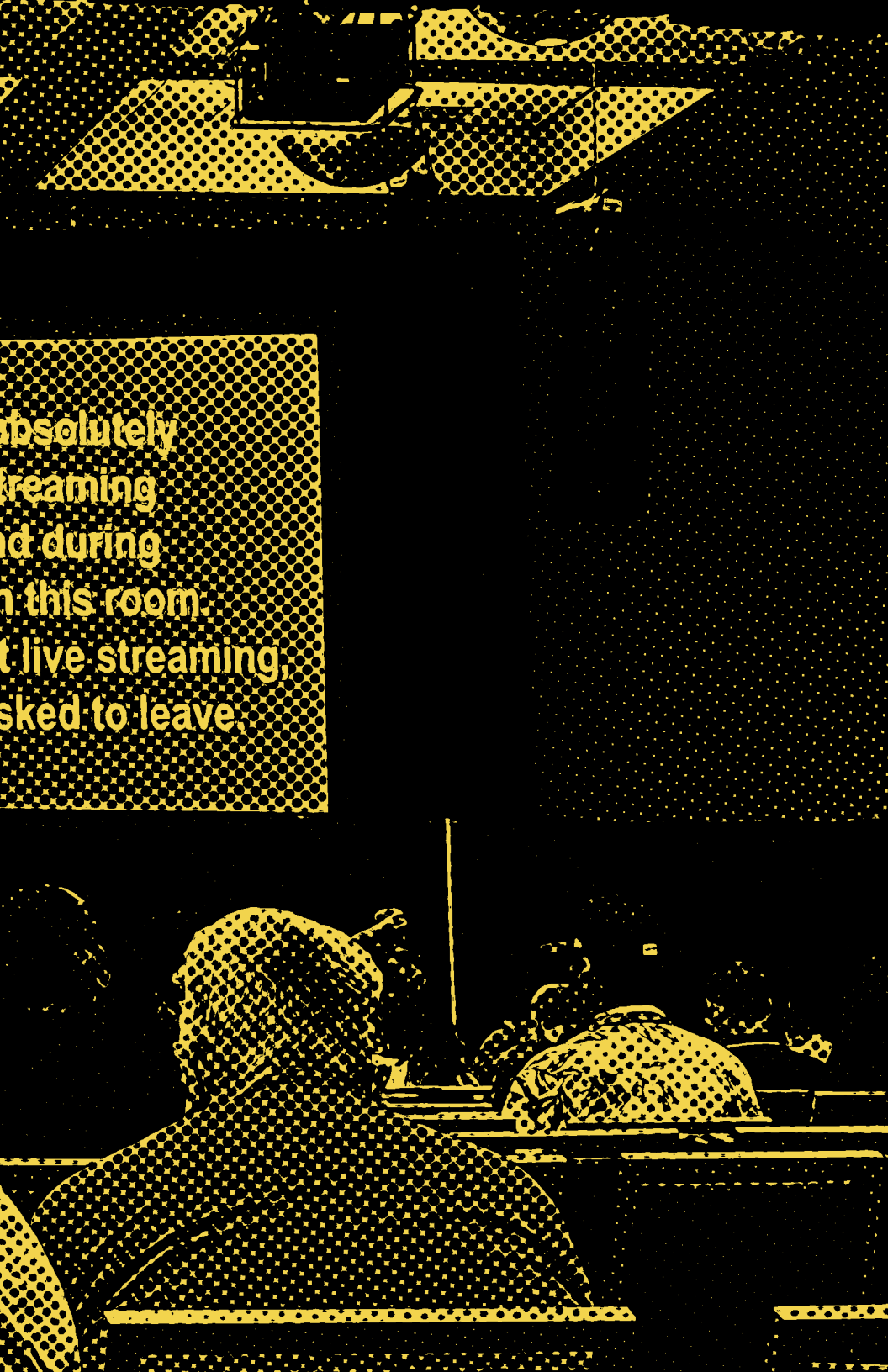
Aseel Qazzaz  
Benjamin Woo

RoCCET Lab  
Ottawa 2023

\* Melanie E.S. Kohnen, "Time, Space, Strategy: Fan Blogging and the Economy of Knowledge at San Diego Comic-Con," *Popular Communication* vol. 18, no. 2 (2020): 91-107, DOI: [10.1080/15405702.2019.1627547](https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2019.1627547); Rob Salkowitz, "The Tribes of Comic-Con," in *The Comics World: Comics, Graphic Novels, and Their Publics*, ed. Benjamin Woo and Jeremy Stoll (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 147-164.

† Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).





absolutely  
streaming  
and during  
in this room.  
at live streaming,  
asked to leave.



Based in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada), the **Research on Comics, Con Events, and Transmedia Laboratory** is a hub for interdisciplinary social-science research on comic books and related media.

Grounded in the critical tradition of communication studies but embracing theoretical and methodological approaches from across the humanities and social sciences, our research examines the changing relationships between producers, intermediaries, and audiences in the contemporary popular media industries.

Our research is supported by grants from the Government of Ontario and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

For more on the lab, our work, and our members, visit [roccetlab.ca](http://roccetlab.ca).