

AJVC SLACK CHANNEL

AMA#24 WITH **HARSHVEER JAIN** DATED
3RD JANUARY

SNEAK PEEK



Harshveer Jain - CGO, Qrius. At Qrius (formerly The Indian Economist), Harshveer drives growth at Mumbai-based digital magazine, a start-up at the cusp of content & media consulting.

"I THINK MY OWN BIGGEST AUDIENCE IS ME. SO IF I AM OKAY WITH TAKING A BREAK, I TAKE A BREAK. AUDIENCE CAN WAIT....."

Fascinated with storytelling, in 2019, Harshveer decided to start creating comic strips in a more focused manner. At Storyseller he has tackled an assortment of topics that range from love and relationships to 'adulting' and just casual humor. Prior to Qrius, he worked with Bain & Company. An IITB and IIMC graduate, Harshveer quips that he can't sleep unless he has created something during the day..

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How do you balance being creative and working full time?

a. I am fairly smart. That helps.

b. I have reduced the amount of workload I take upon myself. And have picked a field that keeps my creative side running. (Content Marketing)

c. Don't have an option. I can't work well unless I have 'created' something, so that's also kind of an addiction.

Coffee helps. Constantly, ALWAYS asking questions helps. And just being on the lookout for creative inspiration. Its everywhere.

I want to know how you find inspiration for your ideas? Do you have a knowledge bank of all the ideas where you go back to?

People. Just talking to people. And trying to figure out why people do what they do. It's so fascinating. And also, reading. Books are great to let your mind wander and create while absorbing information (unlike more involving stuff where all senses are occupied, books kind of leave your brain the room to parallel process.

How do you go about starting storyteller comics? What inspired you? And how did you manage to overcome the inertia?

Facebook had banned my account, due to something called mid-term RG in college. I was impersonating Anu Malik. Got banned.

So had to go to Instagram. Didn't really have pictures of myself. So began posting random doodles and pictures. Telling stories around them. And then, well, it became what it is today. There wasn't much of inertia. Honestly, I have always loved telling stories. Plus I couldn't draw for my life, so it wasn't like I had to put in a lot of effort into my posts. And the thought work that goes into it has kind of been accumulating for decades of being a self-involved, hyper curious, shamelessly intrusive, answer-seeking idiot.

What is your process from an idea to execution to sharing it with the world? And how long does it take?

It's usually 3 parts

a. Getting the thought - the insight, the realization. How? Mostly from conversations, people, my own life. Just asking a lot of questions, not doing anything or believing anything unless either I experience it OR I understand the reason behind it. E.g. I didn't quite get how different people like different things. My brother and I were discussing how we can never get a hang of Oscar-winning movies. But a lot of people can. So what's happening here? Am I just supposed to like a movie because critics liked it?

b. Building an analogy around the thought - where else in the world does something similar happen? Now, on the above - I LOVE stars. But I don't care much for constellations. But a LOT of people do, right? They look at the patterns. They make those connections. The figures. And I do that with clouds. So maybe beauty/art is subjective, even with something so real as stars?

c. Then the final bit - what does this mean? Well, for me, it means that there is an infinite potential in all of us combined to pretty much find art wherever. From Tolstoy to turds, people are fascinated by anything. Doesn't mean you have to be as well - but doesn't belittle their source of joy.

Time: Can't say. For instance, the bit above took me as much time as it took to type it out. I was really making it up on the go, and now I have a new post, yay! But other stuff - for instance, my learnings on empathy, gender roles, etc. have taken years. All my teenage life I was a jerk. Maybe still am in a lot of ways. but well, learning and evolving

According to you what is the key behind building an audience organically?

There's a LOT to be told here.

But if I had to put it on one thing, it would be being a shamelessly original version of who you are. It will be unique, fresh, and wonderful and there will be someone who'd like and there are billions of folks in the world - even a tiny fraction is giant. And it's easier being who you are consistently and creatively than be someone else. Unless you want to thief content. That's sad, but that gets you to places. Look at meme pages that 'curate'. Yuck.

How can one get started telling stories? Any advice?

What works for me is making myself a protagonist, finding my 'call to action' (the ring in LOTR, 'you're a Wizard Harry' in HP, Leia's message in Star Wars, the revelation that she's Genovia's princess for Amy in Princess Diaries - there's always some call to action). Mine was to be less of a jerk. And then I became a protagonist on a journey to be more liked. And that helped me carve out my path to Mordor. Or Hogwarts. That's a better thought, actually.

What is one piece of advice you would give to someone just entering college?

I'd say to not be jealous or insecure about other people's achievements, but find the achievement you want for yourself and figure out how to get there. There will be a million things a million different people will be doing well but a billion things they'd suck at. Don't compare someone's success to your failure, but pick your success and just go for it. You can't be everywhere doing everything. So just, find out your ideal 24 hours and see how you can live them.

How did your storytelling/subject evolve during the last year?

I'd say it became less trying to identify myself and more trying to impress myself. So from writing what I want others to read, became more about writing what I'd want to read if I was following myself. So I guess I just became a big fan of myself and have been creating for my own self.

Have I mentioned I am extremely self centred? Here, proof

And this meant looking at myself as the case study - and how can I benefit from reading what I write? And then people who'd be like me would benefit as a side-effect. But that kept me true to one archetype, one persona, one TG. Myself.

Is it true that you need to have a certain mindset/mood or environment for creative work and does your full time job affect or have impact on your creative work?

I am not sure. I like to believe it so I can guilt-lessly have coffee/alcohol (for instance, this is being done over wine because I told myself - hey buddy, you can't go meet all these people sober).

However, for me, it's important that I get to be who I am when I am writing/thinking. Which means wearing the clothes I like, being around people I like, the right temperature (summers are the worst yuck), and so. Basically homelier, the better.

Would be great for you to share how you chanced upon storyseller.

Storyteller wasn't available. I played around with a couple of other names but I figured I am going to try to sell stories and ideas to folks (in return for attention). Like a storyteller is 'telling', but I am out here 'trading' my work for attention. So, seller.

How do you go about maintaining the quality of the content? There might be more than one idea going around at a time so how do you decide which is best?

Good thing, I don't. I am such a fanboy of my own self, I believe my shit is gold. So I just spew stuff out as long as I like it.

And if I don't like it, I won't really give it a second thought either way. And I just keep texting ideas to myself, whenever they strike. Like a constant chat with myself. And then build them up and post them without much thought, really. It's a fast world - Instagram algorithms will do the work for me. If something is good, they'll promote, if something isn't, they won't. Peace, why do I worry.

What does it take to create an audience on Instagram (or any other social media) organically in the first few months?

Aren't lots of people already trying it in small ways? Huge potential. but who bears the cost.. only large brands can.. retailer margins are by definition poor in India, so they can't. It is an exciting and globally proven space, but am not over-enthusiastic about it.. I prefer the pay day loan space.

What does it take to create an audience on Instagram (or any other social media) organically in the first few months?

Just keep at it. Frequency is key. You can try to predict what will work what won't, but it's just easier to let the platform do that job for you.

A few other ways are to ride on trends, repackage old content in your style, outright repost someone else's work. Again, it's a long answer. Maybe I could write about it later sometime.

How do you keep asking people the questions? How do you know when to stop? And is it just people you know or also the ones you don't?

Oh yes. You don't want to intrude, make someone uncomfortable, or just be annoying or even invade their space.

So the first thing I always do with people I don't interact with regularly is to ask if it's okay if I ask questions. I have a blanket rule of - whenever in doubt about the other person's comfort level, back off. Unless I have an explicit in from them that they are okay putting in the emotional labour of answering my questions, I shut up. And then there are folks who are unfortunate enough to know me. They face a barrage. Poor things.

Wondering how you got to the point where you knew your work 'sells'? What was your initial traction like and what lessons did you take from the initial engagement?

There were a bunch of folks who were my personal cheerleaders. A lot of churn happened initially, when I was laying my personality out there on my page, right. Sometimes people liked it, sometimes they didn't. But there was a good chunk that stayed. And I figured I owed it to them to be authentic. And that's when I also know I have some 'buyers'. Who give love and attention in return for my writing. So that was my learning - find that core group who'd be with the 'creator' and not just the 'content', and then just write for them.

Do you monetise Storyseller? If yes, how? If not, do you plan to?

Haven't yet. Might do, not sure. Have a couple of exciting projects of my own that I might use the page to help build an audience for.

Any experiences from IIT and IIM which have been a guiding force behind your work at storysellercomics?

I'd say I am closest to folks with whom I was able to be my authentic self. So I just brought that on my page as well. No trying to be someone I am not.

I personally believe that anything could be sold or anyone could be convinced with the right story. Do you agree? Why not? If yes then how has it helped your persuasion power?

I don't know, religions have tried a lot and failed, right? Not everyone believes. Science has failed. Politicians have failed. There are always doubters. Someone who'll not buy. So I tend to accept that not everyone will like my work and that's okay so why bother about them, you know? So I try to put less energy in persuading and more in engaging with folks who already are on board.

How do you tackle a creative burnout? Creating something new consistently is a huge task and can be exhausting, but your audience expects you to always put out things that they would like to see I feel.

I think my own biggest audience is me. So if I am okay with taking a break, I take a break. Audience can wait.

What are your favourite questions you ask people to know more about them? Why are they your favourite?

I don't really have a set of questions. Maybe I made myself sound like a journalist. It's more being involved in the conversations. Like in school - if a teacher explains a concept, and you don't get it, I would keep at it, asking questions, till I could explain it to someone else. So it's mostly about conversations and questioning whenever I don't get or agree with people. Sometimes I question in my head and try to find the answers elsewhere, sometimes I directly ask the folks.



Do you ever feel pressured about engagement/stats on your posts? Has that ever taken a toll on you? How do you cope with it?

Oh yes. It's such a rush, a lack of it is like a lack of glucose. But what keeps me sane is the awareness that I like my content and that even XKCD doesn't always get likes, so who am I?

What recipe do you follow such that your story connects with a large amount of audience?

Nothing specific really. In fact, my complete lack of artistic talent coupled with absolutely no sense of political correctness seems to have worked and people find my work easy and relatable, while in reality its just poorly done and lazily crafted. I got lucky, I suppose
