Cultural Argument and Organizational Constraint in the Comic Book Industry

by Matthew Paul McAllister

Throughout its history the comic book has had the potential to both legitimate dominant social values and provide an avenue for cultural criticism, though current trends toward conglomerate and licensing encourage more mainstream content.

To what extent do the mass media celebrate dominant viewpoints? The comic book has been part of the ongoing debate on this question. Notwithstanding some lack of academic attention to the comic book form (3, 57), studies basically have fallen into one of two intellectual camps.

According to the “cultural legitimation” perspective, comic books, like all capitalistic media, tend to reflect the status quo. Kasen, for instance, focuses on the legitimation of the U.S. class structure in selected comic strips1 from 1925 to 1975 via their celebration of the “self-made man” (31).

Other works are more explicitly critical of the medium. In How to Read Donald Duck, Dorfman and Mattelart argue that the exportation of Walt Disney comic books from the United States to other countries legitimates Western capitalism by distorting the working-class situation, commodifying relationships, and presenting people who are not from the United States as unintelligent (17). In The Empire’s Old Clothes, Dorfman attempts to de mythologize the modern superhero, such as Superman, who legitimizes the dominant social system by working within it, ignoring working-class social issues, and solving all other problems through individual, physical intervention (16). Likewise, Andrae argues that the early Superman comic books legitimized the New Deal philosophy of state intervention and effectively converted the social evils of that time into the personal evils of Superman’s enemies (1).

In contrast, other scholarship celebrates the complexity and diversity of issues raised in comic books. This work focuses on how comics mirror a pluralistic society through the aesthetic talents of their creators. Work in this “cul-

1 Although the mode of presentation of comic books and comic strips are similar, the industrial and organizational contexts are quite different, making them two different media for the purposes of this discussion.

Matthew Paul McAllister is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He would like to thank D. Charles Whitney for his helpful comments on this article, an earlier version of which was presented to the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Boston, November 1987.

Copyright © 1990 Journal of Communication 40(1), Winter. 0021-9916/90/$0.00 + .05

55
tural criticism” category has addressed the ability of Spider-Man to convey rebellious, existential views of the world (40) and to address normally ignored social issues, such as student protests (34); of Captain America to discuss images and critiques of patriotism (33); and of the Marvel Comics Group in general to consider a variety of political issues, such as Watergate (42).

Yet the legitimization/criticism dichotomy ignores the complexity of the issue. Argumentation itself, for example, may be more a matter of degree than of absolutes (56). And even the most fundamental social criticism appearing in mainstream media may, in certain instances, serve to legitimate dominant social values and structures. As Gitlin shows, oppositional movements can be “framed,” their voice and arguments distorted and labeled as deviant and wrong, in such a way as to depoliticize them (23).

The above-mentioned studies of cultural messages in comic books tend to analyze them as fairly independent of the comics’ specific industrial and organizational context. Much work has been done, however, on how industrial practices influence other media content (6, 22, 23, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56). The structure of an industry may constrain a medium’s content; for example, the degree of competition in a medium may affect the amount of innovation and diversity in its content, with more competition encouraging diverse content (54, p. 108). Industry regulatory mechanisms, including the types of government regulation and self-regulation, shape the degree of societal legitimization/criticism (55). The industry’s perceived markets may influence content, as one study of children’s books found (53); so may different distribution systems and potential sources of revenue (56).

But in addition to these larger industrial characteristics, the practices of specific organizations are also important variables. The modes of production in media organizations, including how work is routinized, strongly influence content (6, 22, 23, 52). Likewise, the organizational incentive systems of management and workers, and the perceived ratio of risks to benefits, may influence the degree to which innovation is attempted and dominant ideas criticized (54, p. 110).

The superhero comic book industry may be seen as a particularly valuable case in point for illustrating the relationship between these industrial and organizational factors and the degree of cultural argument they permit or encourage. In this article I expand on that relationship, beginning with an overview of three major industrial influences on the content of early superhero comic books: the primary market for comic books being children, company ownership and the production process, and World War II. After surveying changes during the fifties and sixties, I conclude with a discussion of current trends in the comic book industry and the present status of the medium as a vehicle for cultural criticism.

The first key factor contributing to comic books’ legitimization of dominant social values is the fact that they began as a medium for children. The earliest comic books were bound reprints of comic strips that were given away as premiums for the purchase of children’s products. In 1933 the Eastern
Color Printing Company reprinted “Joe Palooka” and “Mutt and Jeff” for companies like Procter & Gamble, Wheatena, and Milk-o-Malt (59, p. 339). An early pioneer of comic books, M. C. Gaines, and Eastern Color demonstrated comic books' economic potential as a direct sales medium with the successful marketing of Famous Funnies in 1934 (59, p. 340). Other comic books, such as National Allied’s New Fun Comics, proved the economic value of including new material in a book. In 1937, National Allied, now called National Periodical, published Detective Comics, one of the first comic books devoted to a single theme. (Its success can be measured by the fact that National Periodical would later become DC Comics.)

The long-term success of the comic book as a children’s medium was not guaranteed, however, until the 1938 publication of the first superhero comic book, National Periodical's Action Comics, featuring Superman. Within a year, Action Comics and its sister publication Superman were the biggest money-makers of the newly formed industry (28, p. 46). Their success was reinforced by Superman's pervasiveness in other media, such as Max Fleischer's movie cartoons, and in a syndicated newspaper comic strip beginning in January 1939 (59, p. 343). By 1941, the two Superman comic books sold 1.4 million copies every two weeks (39, p. 238).

Children regarded the early comic books “as their books” (59, p. 334), the first medium they exclusively could call their own. Ninety-five percent of boys and 91 percent of girls between the ages of six and eleven bought comic books regularly by 1943 (39, p. 239). Annual sales revenue reached $15 million, approximately 75 percent of which came from children's purchases (59, p. 334).
344). Comic books appealed to children because of their action orientation, their colloquial and simple language, and their pictorial reinforcement of the messages (21, p. 220).

Because they were designed and marketed for children, early comic books tended to legitimate dominant cultural values in at least two ways. First, they had to have plots and characterizations that children could easily grasp; they shied away from themes dealing with sophisticated social criticism, which would be difficult to convey to children (especially in a printed format). Through the 1940s, then, comic books stressed simple themes, such as good versus evil, with clearly established rules for understanding which characters were good and which were bad.

Second, and more important, because they targeted themselves as a medium for children, the comics became particularly vulnerable to outside criticism and pressures, at a time when it was not clear that they were protected by the First Amendment (30). Educators and psychologists have endlessly debated whether comic books corrupt children. In 1940, one of the first descriptions of comic books in a professional journal (Childhood Education) claimed that comics' crude blacks and reds spoil the child's natural sense of color, their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories. Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the "comic" magazine (38, p. 56).

Such criticism was not lost on the major publishers of the 1940s, some of whom, such as National Periodical and Fawcett Comics (publisher of Captain Marvel Adventures), formed boards of leading educators and celebrities in an attempt to deflect it (59, p. 348). Thus, the potential for outside criticism from parents, educators, community and religious groups, and especially the government tended to "mainstream" content and to discourage themes that might be viewed as corrupting.

A second structural influence on the early comic book, especially through the 1940s, was the basic organization of the industry and the way the medium was produced. With the economic success of the Superman character, the superhero comic book industry expanded quickly and massively. In 1939–1940, there were 60 comic book titles on the stands; by 1941 there were 168 (59, p. 344). Competition in the newly found market increased; there were 34 different comic book publishers by 1948 (58, p. 3). As in any medium, there was tension between those industry practitioners who saw their product as a commodity and those who saw it as an artistic endeavor. In the industry's first decade, the scales were overwhelmingly tipped toward the commodities view.

Many early comic book organizations, especially the smaller companies, were owned by people who had earned sizable amounts of money during Prohibi-
tion, not always legally, and sought to invest this money in easily accessible and successful industries (61, p. 25). The philosophy of many of these early publishers was
do it cheap. Find cheap labor, pay cheap prices. Low overhead. Tie up as little money as possible. Take out as much money as possible. The results were predictable—in a few years the bad drove out the good (61, p. 25, emphasis in original).

By the mid-1940s production was already highly routinized (59, p. 349), and the strict divisions of tasks between artists, writers, and editors were not conducive to artistic innovation or autonomy. For artists, especially, economic incentives encouraged simple, quickly produced content. Many artists were teenage boys from modest backgrounds who were willing to work for low wages (61, p. 25). They were typically paid by the page (at first around $15), which encouraged them to work quickly (59, p. 350). The publisher usually owned the rights to the finished artwork, and artists and writers were rarely credited (59, p. 350).

These factors, then, encouraged early comic book creators to work quickly and to put little artistic effort into plots, characterizations, and illustrations. This, coupled with the main audience of the medium, children, reinforced the formulaic aspects and mainstream themes of the comic book.

A third factor to influence the content of comic books in their early years was World War II. The war effort in the 1940s increased the importance of reinforcing dominant social values and institutions to solidify U.S. sentiment against the Axis menace. Comic books did their part. In the few years before the United States entered the war, over 25 “patriotic” superhumans appeared in comic books (26, p. 36). Comics at this time had a unique twin audience: children at home and bored soldiers in the foxholes. Comic books, in fact, outsold the Saturday Evening Post, Life, and Reader’s Digest ten to one at military post exchanges (63, p. 198); 44 percent of men in training camps read comic books regularly (20, p. 2).

At home, comic characters pushed the sale of war bonds, warned children of sabotage efforts, encouraged blood donations and product rationing, attempted to prevent work absenteeism and intolerance of the war, and warned against overoptimism (57, p. 198). Many comic books romanticized the United States and stereotyped the German and Japanese. “It was once a common sight to behold the Human Torch burning the arm off a grotesquely deformed Japanese while a pretty girl gleefully cheered him on” (43, p. 126). Superman, of course, was central to this campaign. In one wartime adventure, he tells a group of soldiers, “I have seen proof that American soldiers cannot be defeated by Superman or anyone else—not even Mr. Schickelgruber’s so-called master race!” (36, p. 173). World War II comic books exemplified the medium’s pur- est expression of dominant social values.
The period after the war and into the 1950s was a watershed era for the comic book, which began to be viewed as a potential art form. For the first time, young artists and writers who as children had been fans of comic books began to filter into the business, altering the way the work was approached and produced.

No publisher exemplified this trend more than EC Comics, which stood for either Entertaining Comics or Educational Comics, depending upon the particular publication. The company had been started in 1945 by M. C. Gaines, the early comics pioneer (28, p. 42). When Gaines died in a boating accident in 1947, his son William inherited the financially weak business. The activities of the younger Gaines illustrate the tendency noted by Turow (54, p. 110) for newly appointed executives to spur innovation within an organization. Gaines brought a fresh approach to the industry and experimented with production conventions. Although the company did not publish superhero comic books, the characteristics and effects of its unique policies would greatly affect that genre.

First, EC altered the incentive system of comic book production. Gaines developed a “star system” of creators, especially artists, who were publicized to readers. Although the traditional division of labor between artist, writer, and editor was for the most part maintained at EC, as were deadline pressures, Gaines and his chief editors, Harvey Kurtzman and Al Feldstein, encouraged their artists to develop distinct drawing styles. EC also stressed the personae of the artists, occasionally including full-page biographies of them in certain comic books (28, p. 46).

Second, Gaines avoided the two traditional comic book genres, gentle “animal” humor (which his father had published) and the superhero, finding them too restrictive and predictable. Instead, EC developed three relatively new comic book genres, with a slightly more mature orientation: the horror/science fiction comic, the war comic, and the satiric comic.

The EC horror comics of the early 1950s stressed realistic art, including the depiction of blood and gore, and the surprise ending. “Virtue doesn’t always have to triumph,” Gaines suggested to writers (28, p. 60). One story in Shock SuspenStories told of a man beaten to death by an overpatriotic mob because he did not take off his hat while a U.S. flag passed by; the end of the story revealed the man to be a blind war veteran (44, p. 306). The war comics, created by Kurtzman, attempted to convey a documentary tone and avoid false sentiment—quite different from the war comic books of only five years before (28, p. 62). The satiric comic was, of course, Kurtzman’s Mad, which perhaps best illustrated EC’s effective criticism of accepted attitudes, not only through its artistic style and manifest content but through its challenging of many accepted American values in its storylines. As Daniels noted, the “three members of the press who attacked Senator Joseph McCarthy nationally before he was censured by his colleagues were Walt Kelly, Herblock, and Harvey Kurtzman” (12, p. 84). EC’s realistic art, unpredictable plots, and oppositional themes were to influence many of the underground comic creators of the 1960s and 1970s (19, p. 33).
Ironically, although EC made the first serious attempt at cultural criticism in comic books, the company also catalyzed the formation of what turned out to be an instrument of mainstream control: the self-regulatory body called the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA). Already susceptible to outside pressure groups because of its child-oriented market, the comic book industry was pushed to center stage by the realistic art of EC Comics, especially in its horror comics, and the cruder horror comics produced by others.

The pressure that the industry had felt since the early 1940s from parent groups, church groups, and educators was increased by the popularity of the horror and “crime” comics. Parents picketed supermarkets that sold comic books (44, p. 312). In Seduction of the Innocent in 1954, child psychiatrist Frederic Wertham accused the crime comic book of perpetuating juvenile delinquency, romanticizing criminal and sexual deviance, and belittling authority (60). Excerpts from the book were reprinted in several popular magazines, such as Ladies Home Journal. By 1955, at least sixty communities had held formal investigations of comic book distribution in their areas, and several implemented regulatory measures (20, p. 31). But the most imposing pressure came from the U.S. Senate, whose 1954 investigation of the relationship between the comic book and juvenile delinquency concluded that responsibility for content rested with distributors and publishers. Self-regulation was strongly advised (58).

As has been noted elsewhere, the ability of pressure groups to influence a medium depends greatly upon its perceived vulnerability to such pressure (55, p. 104). Comics were evidently seen as sufficiently vulnerable. The industry had attempted self-regulation already, in 1948, when 12 major publishers formed the Association of Comic Magazine Publishers (ACMP) and promised to give a seal of approval only to comic books that met its six-point code. But the organization dissolved due to unclear objectives and a lack of unity. In fact, “some highly objectionable comic books” with the ACMP Seal of Approval were used as evidence of the Association’s irresponsibility at the Senate hearings (58, p. 31). This embarrassment may have strengthened the industry’s perception that it needed a strict self-regulated censor.

The result was the Comics Code Authority of the CMAA, formed in 1954. It was headed by former New York City magistrate Charles F. Murphy, who became the comic book equivalent of movie censor Wilbur Hays. The Comics Code Authority survived financially by charging a fee to the 24 major publishers who subscribed to it (20, p. 16). A comic book had to be submitted to the Association in order to receive the Code Seal of Approval. Although the CMAA itself had no official censorship powers, the seven participating distributors could return to the publisher unopened stacks of unapproved comic books (28, p. 93).

The Comics Code Authority was explicitly designed to “mainstream” the values and messages presented in comic books. One rule, for example, stated that “policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall not be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority” (58, p. 36).
Within its first six months of existence the Authority reviewed 5,000 stories, 200 of which were rejected and 1,300 of which were revised (30, p. 72). Many comic book publishers were forced out of business. EC at first subscribed to the Code but abruptly abandoned it after a story about a black astronaut was to be rejected unless the character was recolored as white (44, p. 314). Like some other publishers, EC then switched to a larger-sized format that was not subject to the Code.

The Code was “a setback for the art of comics, which was forced into essentially infantile patterns when its potential for maturity had only begun to be explored” (12, p. 83). By the middle 1950s and into the very early 1960s, not only had the Code eliminated much of the comic book industry’s creativity, but television was cutting into circulation figures. Even superhero comic books were affected. Captain Marvel Adventures, which at one time had had a circulation of over two million, was cancelled during this period (although the book’s demise also can be attributed to an expensive legal dispute with DC Comics [32, p. 76]).

**In the early to middle 1960s, however, three factors helped to rejuvenate the industry, the first of which was the popularity of the “Batman” television program.** “Batman,” which premiered on ABC on January 12, 1966, was an immediate hit and stayed on the air for three seasons, compiling 120 episodes. Its success affected the comic book as a medium and as an industry, in three ways.

First, it helped the comic book industry to thrive financially. Although much of this credit, as will be discussed, belongs to the Marvel Comics Group, the program’s popularity filtered down to the entire comic book medium (10, p. 25). Primarily, of course, the program boosted the sales of the publisher of Batman and Detective Comics, thus contributing to the oligopolistic structure of the industry in the seventies in which two companies, DC and Marvel, dominated.

Second, the program to some degree reinforced the “campy” nature of comic books. The show apparently was based less on the comic book than on the unintentionally silly Batman movie serials of the 1940s. Producer William Dozier emphasized the “camp” to derail any possible criticism reminiscent of the EC controversy (10, p. 25). Especially in the mid-1960s, DC Comics allowed this campiness to permeate the tone of many of their books (a trend in part countered by their more adult-oriented competitor, Marvel). Thus, as Bernabo (4) points out, the anti-violent crime message of the original comic book character—the child Bruce Wayne watching his parents murdered in cold blood—“was lost in a sea of satire” (p. 7).

Finally, and perhaps most important, the program’s success pointed to the unlimited potential for licensing popular characters to other media and products. The Licensing Company of America and its client, DC comics, “licensed every type of clothing imaginable” with the Batman image (13, p. 36). Although some multimedia licensing activity of Superman had occurred earlier, the “Batman” TV program more obviously foreshadowed the emergence of the
comic book industry as a big business enterprise by highlighting a source of revenue that had been relatively unexploited. Today the profit potential of comic characters has skyrocketed, as may be suggested by the fact that National Periodical was acquired by the synergistically oriented Warner Communications Inc. in 1968. The increased emphasis on licensing may be seen as generally encouraging more mainstream messages in the comic book to maximize its market potential.

A second factor that improved the financial picture of the comic book industry during the 1960s was the emergence of Stan Lee's innovative Marvel Comics Group. Turow (54) has argued that innovation in media organizations is most likely to come from less powerful organizations and executives who have little to lose and much to gain (p. 110). Just as EC had illustrated this theory in the 1950s, Marvel illustrated it in the 1960s.

Lee was an editor and writer for Magazine Management Inc., a corporation whose subsidiaries included the financially weak Atlas Comics, Timely Comics, and Marvel Comics (58, p. 46). Lee, having entered the business at its birth in 1938, was the only prominent editor who had spent his entire professional life in the industry (29, p. 50). In 1961, Lee was encouraged to experiment with the medium with which he had been so long associated, for two reasons. The first was a self-described "mid-life crisis," in which his long career in a frustratingly restrictive business was taking its toll (29, p. 51). The second was the presence of writer-artist Jack Kirby, a comic book veteran who had earlier created such popular characters as Captain America for Magazine Management. Using Kirby's skill, Lee began to experiment with the production process by breaking down the traditional writer/artist distinction, encouraging collaboration between artist and writer in the development of plot, theme, and character (29, p. 52).

Led by Lee, Marvel practitioners began to renew EC's tradition of social criticism, but at a more fundamental level. Marvel broke new ground on many then-taboo topics. A 1971 issue of The Amazing Spider-Man dealt with the drug addiction of the superhero's friend. Although the Comics Code Authority had refused to approve it, the issue was well received, gaining a favorable review in the New York Times. The CMAA was forced to loosen a few of its restrictions, for example by allowing the occasional portrayal of sympathy for villains or the questioning of public officials (12, p. 144). Some social criticism was, in this sense, officially sanctioned; however, Lee may have felt he had the clout to challenge the CMAA because the National Institute of Health had asked him to publish the story (10, p. 345). Other Marvel innovations include the liberalized portrayal of women characters (9, p. 253), the occasional merging of protagonist and antagonist (12, p. 137), and even the discovery, by a horrified Captain America, of corruption in the presidency—a plotline that began, ironically, before Watergate (42, p. 91).

The Marvel Comics Group was tremendously popular. The Amazing Spider-Man eventually overtook Superman in sales, and from the early seventies to the present Marvel has held from 40 to 60 percent of the superhero comic
book market (7, p. 110). The dominance of the market by Marvel and DC in the 1960s and 1970s was a de facto constraint on content, since a stable market position tends to routinize and mainstream creativity (54, p. 108). No competitive forces arose to move the comic book industry toward new techniques or innovation after Marvel had firmly established itself during this period.

Although Marvel stories occasionally questioned the way our society deals with specific issues, only villains presented such radical arguments (for example, "This world is in terrible shape. . . . I will take control!"). Reform, not revolution, was the heroes' approach to social problems; Captain America may have found corruption in the Oval Office, but his solution was to remove the corruption, not the Office. In this way, mainstream comic books of the era continued to legitimize dominant institutions, even if not in the chauvinistic mode of the World War II era.

**The third rejuvenating influence on the comic book industry was the rise of underground “comix.”** Here was a comic book form that did present radical arguments and challenge mainstream solutions and institutions.

The first modern underground comic was Jaxon’s *God Nose* (*Snot Reel*) in 1963. The form gained nationwide attention, however, with Robert Crumb’s *Zap Comix* in 1967 (19, p. 52). Two characteristics are central to the undergrounds: radical opposition to dominant institutions and an adult readership. Crumb’s Mr. Natural inhabited a world where free love and drugs were explicitly desirable, and comix such as *Class War Comix* and *Slow Death Funnies* openly presented radical arguments as reasonable and even preferable.

Underground creators enjoyed complete artistic autonomy; many artists wrote
and edited their own stories (19, p. 20). As Stan Lee wrote to an underground artist: “In a way I envy you, it must be a gas to let yourself go and do whatever tickles your funny bone” (12, p. 180). When some of these artists later worked with mainstream comic book publishers, they demanded more freedom; others formed their own companies.

The undergrounds influenced three significant transformations of production, distribution, and exhibition in the current mainstream comic book industry. First, in the domain of production, the rise of independent companies is challenging Marvel and DC’s hold on the industry. The June 1987 Comics Buyer’s Guide listed 15 major publishers and approximately 140 other comic book companies, many of which are publishers (5, p. 52). Foremost among these new competitors is First Comics, created in 1983 in Evanston, Illinois, and holding an estimated 12 percent of the direct sales market (8, p. 36). But the independents compete not simply for circulation and sales but also for talent. Many of the independents combine the organizational philosophies of underground and mainstream comics. They are profit-oriented but generally less bureaucratized than the two majors, and many, in contrast to traditional industry practice, allow practitioners to keep the full creative rights to their work (29, p. 269).

Second, the distribution system of comic books has been renovated. Until recently, comic books were distributed by organizations that handled many other types of periodicals, such as large-size magazines. Now, however, approximately 75 percent of all comic books are circulated to exhibitors by distributors who deal exclusively with comic books and related material (48, p. 55). Direct distribution does not allow retailers to return unsold comics, as they could in the past; on the other hand, discounts are higher (50 percent as opposed to the traditional 20 percent), and orders can be placed faster and more flexibly than with wholesalers (8, p. 34). Direct distribution has aided the growth of independent producers, who sometimes have had problems plugging into the more established distribution systems. Advertising Age credits this new distribution system with “recharging the competitive structure” of the entire industry (7, p. 110).

Finally, new exhibitors and new markets have been developed for comic books. The rise of the comic book “specialty shop” is one example. Some exhibitors sell nothing but comic books and related paraphernalia, encouraging the formation of a comic book collector’s culture in which trends and opinions of practitioners are discussed. Comic books are also finding an outlet in bookstores, such as Waldenbooks and B. Dalton. This new avenue of exhibition provides legitimacy, as well as increased exposure, to the new adult market that is being cultivated for the more mainstream comics. A survey commissioned by Marvel estimates that the average comic book reader is about 20 years old (18, p. 1); DC estimates that the comic book specialty shop customer is between 15 and 28 (48, p. 55).

Producers are going after this market as they never have before. This includes the creation of new “graphic novels”—basically high-quality, longer, and more expensive comic books—and Marvel’s Epic comics. Many indepen-
dents, additionally, target themselves specifically to the adult reader. Thus there are more sophisticated themes than those for the traditional child audience; more attention to the quality of art and writing is required; outside pressure groups may relax; and the creative personnel will become more visible as adults develop favored creators and talent (as opposed to favored characters, which is more typical of a children’s market).

DC, especially, has changed the production philosophy that had dominated the company over the last thirty years, perhaps because it could no longer take its status for granted. In December 1984, for example, independent books such as American Flagg! and Judge Dredd outsold Superman. (In fact, 56 comic books sold better than Superman that month [50, p. 23].)

For the first time, DC is stressing the importance of creative autonomy as an organizational value. Traditionally the editor was in creative control (29). But to compete in the new adult market, both DC and Marvel have had to promise popular talent more than simply high pay; like the independents, they have to promise some degree of artistic autonomy. Two examples illustrate this trend.

The first is DC’s hiring of artist/writer John Byrne to revamp the character of Superman “in the hope of pumping new life into the time-worn character” (62, p. 66). Indeed, Byrne claims that the idea to completely retell Superman’s origin, a fairly drastic move for such an established character, was his rather than DC’s (62, p. 66). Byrne is one of the highest-paid comic talents and has a tremendous following; he has appeared on “The Today Show” and in USA Today. Part of the newfound fame of comic book auteurs may be explained by the increasingly adult audience, which is interested as much in creators as in their characters, and also by the rise of the comic book specialty shop, in which opinions about artists are shared.

Another example of DC’s new emphasis is the case of Frank Miller. Miller writes and draws The Dark Knight series, a very popular and expensive comic featuring a middle-aged, weary Batman in a corrupt and violent future United States. Miller, like Byrne, is an auteur who has a cultlike following, and DC celebrates his work as “an exercise in creative autonomy” (13, p. 50).

The Dark Knight subverts traditional portrayals of the superhero. (Such publications as the Village Voice and Rolling Stone, in fact, have debated whether this specific subversion is fascist or genius [4, p. 1].) The comic book is set in a future world where nuclear war has been triggered, Reagan is still president (and dresses in red, white, and blue nightgowns), Superman has become the government’s paid muscle, and crime, politics, and the media have spiraled out of control. Outlawed as a hero, surrounded by a corrupt world, slightly psychotic himself, Batman goes underground and forms an army of teenage deviants “to bring sense to a world plagued by worse than thieves and murderers” (The Dark Knight 4, 1986, p. 77, emphasis added).

---

2 This strategy has apparently worked to some degree. In August 1987, for the first time since the creation of direct distribution, DC had a larger market share in comic book specialty shops than Marvel (46, p. 1).
These innovations are encouraging more cultural criticism in adult-oriented comic books at the same time that controversy about those comics' content, and the increase in licensing activity, is reinforcing the legitimizing role of comics targeted to children. As Turow points out, the increasing conglomeration of media industries encourages increased "linking pin activities," or the selling of material from one production firm to another (56, pp. 149, 158). This is the situation in today's comic book industry.

In December 1986, New World Pictures Ltd., a producer of low-budget films that has been described as "the Rent-a-Wreck of independent studios" (11, p. 25), purchased the Marvel Entertainment Group for $50 million (27, p. 114). The Marvel Entertainment Group, which brought in gross revenues of over $100 million in 1986, consists of the Marvel Comics Group, currently the largest comic book publisher, and Marvel Productions, whose nearly 250 half-hour animated productions make it the third-largest creator of such productions (37, p. 3). According to New World's 1986 Annual Report,

Marvel Productions will de-emphasize the production of animated programming based upon [other companies'] licensed characters and concentrate on the development and production of programming based upon existing and newly created characters fully-owned by Marvel. As a result, characters translated into successful programming will permit Marvel, rather than third-party licensors, to benefit from the licensing, merchandising, publishing and other ancillary revenue streams which can be generated by character exploitation (37, p. 20).

In January 1989, New World sold the Marvel Entertainment Group to the Andrews Group Inc. for over $82 million. Although Marvel is no longer owned by a motion picture producer, its licenses retain their vast potential. As one industry representative observed, "Marvel spins off a lot of income for whoever owns it—it's a cash cow" (49, p. 1).

As noted earlier, DC Comics is also owned by a media conglomerate, Warner Communications Inc. With the July 1989 acquisition of Warner by Time Inc., DC becomes part of an even larger media conglomerate (25). It has been argued elsewhere (56, p. 156) that the development of syndicated licensing encourages organizations to develop popular characters that flow with, rather than oppose, dominant social values.

The June 23, 1989, release of the Warner Brothers motion picture Batman underpins what is to date the most impressive effort to merchandise a comic book character. Sales of Batman merchandise in the United States could exceed $250 million, making the motion picture licensing effort one of the most successful in history (24, p. 5). By June 1989, one comic book distributor was offering 279 different Batman items in its catalog to retailers (45, p. 1).

Even newer independent publishers of more adult comic books are trying their hands at licensing. A Fall 1987 ABC program, "Sable," was based on the comic book Jon Sable Freelance, a First Comics Publication (18, p. 33).

The licensing resulting from the popularity of the comic book Teenage
*Mutant Ninja Turtles*, produced by the independent Mirage Studios, is even more impressive. Linking pin activities include video games, toys, clothes, and a first-run syndicated television program (15, p. 54); the merchandise features "sanitized versions of the wry but brutal" comic book turtles (41, p. 86).

Despite the impact on the industry of the new adult market, the comic book is still a potential target for outside pressure. In the beginning of 1987, DC announced the implementation of a new "labeling" policy for their comic books, although spokespeople for DC denied any outside influence in making the decision (14, p. 1). The plan called for all DC comics to carry on their covers one of three designations: "For Universal Readers," "Suggested for Mature Readers," or "Adults." Many creators were outraged, and four of the most popular DC practitioners—Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Marv Wolfman, and Howard Chaykin—at first stated that they would no longer work for the organization. Moore characterized the proposed ratings system as "both impractical and spineless, genuinely demeaning to the medium, its audience, and the people who work within it" (35, p. 36). Later the ratings policy changed to label only certain books as "Suggested for Mature Readers" (14, p. 1).

In a trend that must remind veteran practitioners of the 1950s, the news media are criticizing the adult orientation of comic books, especially the increase in violence and sexual themes. In April 1989 a *New York Times Magazine* article questioned the judgment of comic book publishers, noting that "comics have forsaken campy repartee and outlandishly byzantine plots for a steady diet of remorseless violence" (41, p. 32). A June 1989 article in *Time* went a step farther, explicitly linking violence in comic books with a rise in juvenile delinquency. Presenting a history in which EC and Frederic Wertham did not exist, the author writes, "While parents may fondly remember the dating shenanigans of Archie and Veronica or the wholesome exploits of superheroes, their children are now being offered a titillating blend of sadism and sex" (51, p. 57). Similar discussions have been featured on the nationally televised programs "The Today Show" and "Larry King Live." Such visible public criticism does not escape the notice of mainstream producers.

Another controversy involved exhibition rather than production. In December 1986 six police officers entered Friendly Frank's Comic Shop of Lansing, Illinois, arrested the attendant on duty, and closed the shop for the "intent to disseminate obscene materials" (2). These "obscene materials" were adult-oriented comic books, such as *Oomaha the Cat Dancer* and *Bizarre Sex*, that were published by independents. The attendant was later found guilty of the obscenity charges (47).

The Friendly Frank's incident again highlights the comic book's vulnerability to outside pressure. The case may make adult-oriented comic books the focus of attention from community and religious organizations, similar to the ones formed in the 1950s. It may also force exhibitors to be more selective in the types of comic books they sell. As Frank Mangiaracina, the owner of Friendly Frank's, noted, "My only fear is that some retailers will be intimidated by this. At some point in Illinois, retailers *should* be over-cautious. Someone may take this as a mandate to harass retailers" (47, p. 3).
Industrial influences on comic book content are numerous, diverse, and at times contradictory. Some factors, such as the new adult market, appear more likely to encourage cultural criticism at fundamental levels; others, such as increased licensing activity, would seem likely to perpetuate legitimation of dominant values and viewpoints. These factors, of course, are not perfect predictors; moreover, in some instances, the medium may reflect both cultural argument and dominant values.

The level of cultural criticism is a relative one. The new independents, despite their willingness to take production risks, are still more constrained than the undergrounds of the 1960s. The sometimes superficial criticism of the independents, then, may become the most radical voice in the industry.

References


43. Thompson, Don. "OK, Axis, Here We Come!" In Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson (Eds.), *All in Color for a Dime*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1970.


