Mass Panic: The Postwar Comic Book Crisis

Claire Wilkerson
Junior Division
Historical Paper
Paper Length: 2,403 Words
“Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry”

-Fredric Wertham, psychiatrist, federal testimony, April 21, 1954.

“My only limits are bounds of good taste”

-Bill Gaines, comic book publisher, federal testimony, April 21, 1954.

From 1948-1954, adults were alarmed by the effects of objectionable comic books on children, convinced that their depiction of crime and violence caused juvenile delinquency. Confronted with the possibility of federal censorship, the comic book industry created a set of guidelines to regulate objectionable material, compromising its freedom of expression in the face of authority. This indicated a larger pattern of adult fear of youth culture.

Comic books in postwar America were often gruesome and usually violent, illustrated with lurid artwork and decorated with preposterous plot twists. Adults saw them as beneath their notice, little more than trash. To children, on the other hand, they represented a world of fantasy and adventure, far from the scrutinizing gaze and moral impositions of their parents. Priced at ten cents so as to be easily affordable to their youthful market, and passed along from reader to reader, comic books quickly became the most popular mass medium of their time.

“Badly drawn, badly written, and badly printed-a strain on young eyes and young nervous systems-the effect of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant...their hypodermic injection of sex and murder makes the child impatient with better, though quieter stories,” wrote book reviewer Sterling North in his widely reprinted Chicago Daily News article, “A National Disgrace.” The year was 1940, and comic books, a medium barely seven years old,

---

2 Hajdu, 5.
were already being decried by critics. An organization of the Catholic church, the National Organization for Decent Literature, had launched a campaign to ban books and magazines it deemed immoral in its dioceses.\(^4\) Objectionable comic books quickly became targets of its censorship efforts, mainly because it saw superheroes as pagan due to their superhuman abilities, fascist for solving problems through strength, and immoral because they were often scantily clad.

Before 1942, comic books mainly focused on superheroes, a genre started by the publication of Superman in 1938. In 1942, however, the focus of comic books shifted away from the virtuous deeds of crime-fighters to the depraved ones of criminals with the publication of *Crime Does Not Pay.* The comic book promised “true crime stories”\(^5\) and it delivered mobsters, murder, shooting, and gore in abundance. It proved immensely profitable, spawned a host of competitors, and the crime comics genre grew rapidly in popularity. Crime comic books represented 3 percent of all comic books in 1946. In 1947, they represented 9 percent, and in 1948, 14 percent of all comic books.\(^6\)

In 1948, Collier’s Magazine published an article titled “Horror in the Nursery” relaying the findings of psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham. Wertham had observed child patients at his clinic for two years, and reported he had made a shocking discovery in that time. “Comic book reading was a distinct influencing factor in the case of every single delinquent or disturbed child we studied.” He concluded, “Comic books are, in intent and effect, demoralizing the morals of youth.”\(^7\) Wertham did not conduct a formal scientific study, but he had come to the conclusion that crime comic books were a significant cause of juvenile delinquency. He classified most

\(^4\) Hajdu, 76.
\(^6\) Hajdu, 110.
comic books as crime comics, rather than the more common classification of crime comics as comic books focusing on criminals. Because his classification of crime comic books was so broad, and since most children read comic books, he was able to connect nearly any case of juvenile delinquency to comic book reading.\(^8\)

This would be a major step forward for the anti-comics cause. Dr. Wertham had connected the well-known idea that comic books “demoralized” children with the menace of juvenile delinquency. In addition, he gave an appearance of scientific credibility to the campaign against comics.\(^9\)

Juvenile delinquency itself was a relatively new phenomenon. It had appeared in the public consciousness during WWII, where it was attributed to unrest caused by the war. To adults, juvenile delinquency represented “the ultimate loss of social control over children.”\(^10\)

Adults had no precedent for their children’s reading of comic books; the medium had not existed during their generation’s childhood. Comic book reading was one aspect of children’s lives that adults did not control. Therefore, it seemed to follow that crime comic books would cause youth to reject society’s norms and rebel against the authority of the law.

In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled a New York state anti-obscenity law unconstitutional in the case *Winters v. New York*. This decision struck down 19 similar laws in other states, and provided a motivation for further anti-obscenity legislation. In April of 1948, the city of Detroit took action, banning thirty-six comics titles. Soon after, Los Angeles banned the sale of crime comic books to minors entirely. According to the American Municipal Association, many cities

\(^{8}\) Hajdu, 233-234.


\(^{10}\) Nyberg, ix.
and towns had banned the sale of objectionable comic books and California was attempting regulation at the state level.\textsuperscript{11}

While outrage against objectionable comic books was consuming government at the state and municipal levels, youth were taking matters into their own hands. In 1954, David Mace was an 8th grade student in the small town of Spencer, West Virginia. His reading teacher encouraged him to lead his school in a campaign against comic books after explaining to him that they were a corrupting influence on children. After almost a month of collecting comic books door-to-door through the town, the students had amassed over 2,000. They heaped them into a pile in the schoolyard, and Mace led the entire school in a pledge to renounce all comic books, before lighting the bonfire.

The story of the Spencer comic book burnings made national news, and it touched off a trend of comic book burnings in schools and other organizations. The public was tired of the objectionable content in comic books, and that manifested itself in bonfires and boycotts of retailers who refused to stop selling them.\textsuperscript{12} Youth were not sure yet what side to take in this debate about their culture, with some children participating in the act wholeheartedly, while others later regretted what they had done.

In an attempt to stem the legal and public backlash against them, comic book companies formed the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers on July 1, 1948. The association recommended members follow its code of “minimum editorial standards,”\textsuperscript{13} closely modeled on the Hays Code, which restricted objectionable content in Hollywood movies. Members in compliance with the code could print “Authorized ACMP” or “Conforms to the Comics Code”

\textsuperscript{11} Hajdu, 93, 94, 95, 96, 107, 108.
\textsuperscript{12} Nyberg, ix.
\textsuperscript{13} Hajdu, 128.
on the covers of their comics. In 1948, thirty-four companies were publishing 270 comics titles. Only fourteen of these had joined the ACMP by the end of that year. All in all, it had failed in its mission to clean up comic books with industry-wide self-regulation.

In 1950, Senator Estes Kefauver was in the middle of the Senate Subcommittee hearings on Interstate Organized Crime that would make him a household name. The investigation was broadcast on national television, and so sensationally popular that some theaters showed the hearings instead of movies. As part of the investigation, the Kefauver committee looked into the role of crime comic books in causing juvenile delinquency. The issue of objectionable comic books had successfully moved from municipal to state and then to federal law.

The Kefauver committee, however, was unable to prove a connection between reading crime comic books and juvenile delinquency. This seemed to satisfy the public. Although Wertham continued his study of comic books and juvenile delinquency, public criticism of comic books quieted down for the next several years.

The legal and public backlash against crime comics had made the genre highly unprofitable. By 1950 crime comic books were mostly dead. Even Crime Does Not Pay responded to the vilification of its material, now focusing its contents on law enforcement and their heroic deeds.

Meanwhile, a new genre, romance comics, had risen from the ashes of crime. With their tales of young love and domestic settings, adults tended to view romance comic books as innocuous. Aimed at teenage girls, they featured young women who took the lead in love and got

---

14 Hajdu, 129.
15 Hajdu, 172.
16 Hajdu, 156.
17 Hajdu, 154.
what they wanted. The young men they pursued were often juvenile delinquent types. Many stories involved rule-breaking, for which the protagonists were rewarded. Such was the popularity of romance comics that of the over 650 titles published in 1950, nearly a fifth were romance.  

EC comics launched its “New Trend” line in 1950. Although competing company Timely had begun publishing horror comics earlier that year, these three titles, The Crypt of Terror, The Vault of Horror, and The Haunt of Fear, started the craze for horror comic books.

Horror comic books, too, twisted the conventions of the 1950s, often featuring husbands and wives plotting against each other. Something nasty would usually happen to the one who emerged triumphant. Their readership, which tended to be teenagers rather than young children, loved this “New Trend” in comics. By 1952, horror represented almost one-third of all comic books. Every month, more than 150 horror titles competed with each other for readers’ dimes. The subject matter of horror comics was more or less standard from title to title and company to company. In an attempt to shock readers into buying their comic books over a competitor’s, companies increased the amount of gore in each issue. This developed into a veritable ‘arms race’ of gruesomeness between the publishers. In December 1952, the federal government investigated objectionable horror and romance comic books. The House Select Committee on Current and Pornographic Materials came to no conclusions on the subject, but it did reignite the issue of comic books and juvenile

---

18 Hajdu, 157.
19 Hajdu, 179.
20 Hajdu, 189.
21 Hajdu, 201.
delinquency. A mother testified that her son was caught in a downward spiral of delinquent behavior that was caused primarily by comic books. This occurred at the same time sources including the New York Times reported juvenile delinquency was on the rise.

In August 1953, the federal Committee on the Judiciary formed a subcommittee to investigate juvenile delinquency. Chaired by Senator Robert C. Hendrickson and joined by Senators Estes Kefauver, Thomas C. Hennings, and William Langer, the hearings were set to begin in November 1953.

In November of 1953, Senator Hendrickson received an impassioned letter from Florida mother Eugenia Y. Genovar. She wrote “If the mothers of our beloved country would unite to have these pernicious comic books banned I am sure it would be a great step forward in control of the young… of course you will have… others who will rise up and say these comics do not harm the minds of the readers but I think the proof they do is right in front of us in increased juvenile delinquency.”

Since the start of the Senate hearings, Robert C. Hendrickson had received some 20,000 letters like this one from members of the public. The sixty-five to seventy-five percent of these blaming comic books and television “crime shows” for juvenile delinquency persuaded Hendrickson and his committee to investigate the role of comic books as a cause of delinquent behavior.

Three days before the Senate hearings on comic books were set to occur, on April 19, 1954, Dr. Fredric Wertham published his book. Titled Seduction of the Innocent, it detailed the

---

22 Hajdu, 203.
23 Hajdu, 202.
25 Hajdu, 251.
findings of his seven-year study of the effects of comic books on children. The book elaborated on the points that he had written about in previous articles. Superman was fascist for triumphing over villains through strength, crime comic books gave children explicit instructions on how to commit crimes, and the word balloons in comic books wreaked havoc on children’s reading abilities, among other things. Wertham’s book garnered generally positive reviews. Some critics found it too extreme in its blame of comic books, but by and large, the public agreed with Wertham.

On April 21, 1954, Senator Robert C. Hendrickson opened the Senate hearings with the words, “We are not a subcommittee of blue-nosed censors… we want to find out what damage, if any, is being done to our children’s minds by certain types of publications which contain a substantial degree of sadism, crime, and horror. This, and only this, is the task at hand.” The hearings were televised, and comic book workers were nervously watching their TV sets, waiting to see what would transpire.

Dr. Fredric Wertham was the first person to testify in the afternoon session. His testimony went over the main points of *Seduction of the Innocent*. The next to testify was Bill Gaines, publisher of EC comics, one of the most popular companies to produce horror comics. He refuted some of Wertham’s points, but his testimony had little of the confidence of the psychiatrist’s. He did, however, make one point: “my only limits are bounds of good taste.”

---

26 Hajdu, 242.
27 “Official Facsimile Excerpts from the Record U.S. Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency.” 1954.
28 “Official Facsimile Excerpts from the Record U.S. Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency.”
29 “Official Facsimile Excerpts from the Record U.S. Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary to
What Gaines saw as in good taste, the Senate subcommittee saw as shocking. Several of his company’s comics had already been displayed by others testifying as examples of the worst in the horror comics genre. However, his point was excellent in that it summed up the comics debate. It had always really been about taste.

The Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency was so pleased with the first set of comic book hearings that they scheduled a second one which took place in July of 1954. Meanwhile, the comic book industry was in a state of panic. The threat of federal censorship was closer than it had ever been. On August 17, 1954, the industry took action in an attempt to keep the government from doing so. All but three comics publishers banded together to create the Comics Magazine Association of America and its set of regulatory guidelines, the Comics Code Authority. The Comics Code was modeled on the Hays Code, but even more prohibitive. It was, in fact, the most restrictive American industry standard ever.

Freedom of expression has always been a core American value. However, the question of how to regulate that expression has resulted in swings between greater and lesser restriction. During the post-WWII period, adults were afraid and uncertain about the future, which manifested itself in an inclination towards censorship in many areas of society. One particular area of conflict was the fear that comic books corrupted youth. The comic book industry submitted to this public backlash, choosing to censor themselves rather than continue losing business. Adults emerged from this compromise more satisfied than youth, proving that children’s morals mattered more than their autonomy.

---

31 Hajdu, 272.
32 Hajdu, 291.
Annotated Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

Annotation: Crime Does Not Pay marked a turning point in comic books from focusing on law enforcement to focusing on criminals, and it began the crime comics genre. This comic book showed me what a typical crime comic looked like, and gave me an idea of why adults would find them objectionable.

Annotation: This is the set of guidelines that the CMAA put in place to regulate objectionable material. I learned how restrictive the level of censorship was that these rules put in place, and understood better how the Comics Code stunted the development of the comics medium for decades to come.

Crist, Judith. “Horror in the Nursery.” *Collier’s*, 27 Mar. 1948,
Annotation: This article detailed the findings of Dr. Fredric Wertham’s research on the effects of comic books on children. It gave scientific legitimacy to the anti-comic book campaign and popularized the idea that comic books cause juvenile delinquency. It helped me understand Dr. Wertham’s research findings and point of view.

Annotation: Eugenia Y. Genovar wrote a letter to Sen. Hendrickson, chairman of the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, detailing her opinion as a mother that comic books caused juvenile delinquency. This helped me understand the public’s views on the issue of comic books and juvenile delinquency.


Annotation: This newspaper article denounced comic books as a menace to children. It was some of the first mainstream criticism of comic books. By reading this article, I gained an understanding of the point of view of the more extreme critics of comic books.

“Official Facsimile Excerpts from the Record U.S. Senate Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency.” 1954.

Annotation: This is the transcript of the proceedings of the Senate hearings on the effects of comic books on juvenile delinquency. Many people testified for and against comic books in these proceedings. It gave me a greater understanding of the views of people on both sides of the comic book debate, as well as the views of the senators conducting the investigation.

*Ladies’ Home Journal*, Nov. 1953,

lostsoti.org/LadiesHomeJournalNovember1953cover.htm.

Annotation: This was an excerpt from Dr. Fredric Wertham’s book *Seduction of the Innocent*, which told parents the disturbing effects that comic books were having on their children’s minds. It gave me an example of the content in Wertham’s book, as well as his views on comic books after the completion of his study on their effects.

Secondary Sources:


University of Pennsylvania,

www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk4cca.html.

Annotation: This web article gave an overview of the anti-comic book campaign, Dr. Wertham’s influence on it, and the comic book industry’s reaction to it. It helped me understand what the major events in the comic book crisis were and how they happened.


Annotation: This book gave a detailed explanation of the causes, effects, and events of the comic book crisis. It gave me historical context and significance, as well as useful academic arguments which helped me form my own.

Annotation: This article gave a short overview of the history of the comics code and its effects on the comic book industry. Its list of further reading at the end helped me find secondary source material.


Annotation: This magazine article was a review of two books on the comic book crisis. It gave the point that although the culture wars of a past generation may seem ridiculous, they were very serious and defining events of their time. This helped me put the comic book crisis into context.